

Motivation for Religious Literacy Practices of Religious Youth: Examining the Practices of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youth in One Community

By

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Dedication

To my wife, Michelle, for inspiration and support.

To my children, Josie, Joshua, Adam, Isaac, Jacob, and Jared, for filling our home with joy.

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Abstract

Literacy and motivation for literacy are important areas in educational research and practice, but there currently exists a gap in the literature of both areas with regard to religious youth. The importance of attending to this gap may be illustrated by the consistently large proportion of religious youth in the United States whose religious literate practices are powerful forces in their lives. Drawing on constructs from the fields of literacy, motivation for reading, and psychology of religion I developed a framework for exploring Methodist and Latter-day Saint (Mormon) youths' literate practices and what drives them. Using qualitative research and data analysis techniques, I observed the 16 youth in this study in various religious contexts for a year. I also conducted three semi-structured interviews and collected artifacts for analysis.

This dissertation explores similarities and differences between the two groups of youth with regard to their literacy practices and their motivations for literacy. The participants from both congregations learned to value religious literate practices through similar, but distinct patterns of religious literacy instruction. Through this instruction Methodist youth learned to value interpreting scripture through discussions. Latter-day Saint youth learned to value knowing what scripture said by reading, recalling, and memorizing passages. The youth were motivated for literacy when their religious environments were safe, connected, and educative, and cohered with their social and cultural values and practices. Motivation for literacy was also influenced by texts. Youth were motivated to engage with religious texts because the texts provided

them with strength, comfort, knowledge about living their lives, and connection with God.

There are several implications of this study. First, educators in various contexts should begin theorizing about how they might more effectively utilize religious youths' literate practices and motivations to develop practices to advance students' literacy learning. Second, literacy researchers should attend to religious youths literate practices with particular attention to the influence of such elements as religious texts, contexts, and cultures on the youths' development and use of religious literate practices. Third, motivation for literacy researchers should study motivation for literacy as a dynamic interaction of readers, texts, contexts, and social and cultural influences.

Chapter 1

Introduction

As a high school English teacher I noticed students carrying, reading, and talking about religious texts before and after school, in the hallways, and in the classrooms. Many students also wore religiously inspired clothing, carried key chains with religious symbols, or wore religiously oriented jewelry. Religion, it seemed, was a powerful force in the lives, literacies, experiences, and identities of many youth. Religion also appeared to influence students' topics of conversation, how they addressed these topics, what they read, and what they wrote about. The apparent influence of religion in these youths' lives in and out of school and the frequency of experiences I had with religious students forced me to seriously consider their literate practices and the motivations that drove them. I began to wonder, for example, why religion mattered to them, in relationship to their literate practices. What literate practices, associated with or influenced by their religious traditions, did these youth engage in? And what motivated these young people to engage in reading, writing, and conversations about their religion? Inspired by these experiences and questions, this dissertation explores the religious literate practices of Christian youth and the motivations that drive them.

Background of the Problem

Historically, successful literacy teaching and learning have been pressing concerns in the United States (Banton Smith, 1934/2002; RAND, 2002; Prothero, 2007). Today they are no less important – or urgent – as teachers too often find students ill-equipped with the necessary literacy skills to learn subject-matter material. National literacy policy reports and assessments

impress upon their readers the struggles American youth have with literacy learning in schools (Biancarosa and Snow, 2006; Graham and Perin, 2007; Lee, Griggs, and Donahue, 2007; Kamil, 2003; Salahu-Din, Persky, and Miller, 2008; Snow and Biancarosa, 2003). Although many states have recently showed improvements in reading scores, in fourth grade 68% of students remain below grade-level reading proficiency. In eighth grade 71 percent are not reading at proficient levels (Lee, Griggs, and Donahue, 2007). In writing, 8th and 12th graders improved in the first decade of 2000, but 69% of 8th graders still fall below grade-level writing proficiency. In fact, some educators have suggested that many of the 7,000 American high school students who drop out of school daily (Pinkus, 2006) do so because they struggle with high school literacy demands (Kamil, 2003; Snow and Biancarosa, 2003). Overall, approximately 8.7 million American students in grades 4-12 struggle to learn the material in their grade-level content area textbooks (Kamil, 2003). Certainly, literacy learning is a vital issue in education. Given the importance of literacy learning and the scale of the literacy challenge, what are educators to do?

Although there is no simple answer, engagement and motivation may be useful constructs for advancing literacy learning (Alexander, 2003; Alexander, Kulikowich, and Jetton, 1994; Biancarosa and Snow, 2003; Kamil, 2003; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; NCTE, 2007; Snow and Biancarosa, 2003). At the National Reading Conference's 2002 adolescent reading research study group, participants believed that understanding youths' motivations "could be the key to improving reading instruction at the secondary level" (Pritcher, et. al, 2007, p.379). Indeed, the importance of research that deepens educators' understanding of students' motivations "to engage successfully in literacy events cannot be overestimated" (Ruddell and Unrau, 2004, p.109). To be effective in their work educators need to be able to teach literacy skills *and* engage their students in meaningful learning. Yet, despite the importance of motivation in literacy learning, research has yet to develop an understanding about what motivates a major segment

of American youth to engage with literacy. To date, Christian youths' motivations for religious literacy remain an unexplored area of study with important questions that need to be addressed. This dissertation aims to address this gap.

In the recent history of literacy research, literacy has been studied as a culturally, historically, and socially situated tool for the acquisition of skills and knowledge (Barton and Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Heath, 1983; Ferdman, 1990; Moll and Gonzalez, 1994; Street, 1984, 1995) that transforms thought and experience (Vygotsky, 1978). Researchers have used this view of literacy to explore the literacies of a variety of youth populations (Alvermann, Young, Green, and Wisenbaker, 1999; Black, 2007; Finders, 1996, 1997; Guerra and Farr, 2002; Guzzetti, 2009; Guzzetti and Gamboa, 2004; Heath, 1983; Moje, 2000; Nasir, 2000; Skinner, 2007; Stone, 2007). As a result we now know much more about the literate practices and motivations for literacy of particular groups of youth, but religious youths' literate practices and motivations, thus far, have received only modest scholarly attention.

Religion (Carter, 1993; Carroll, 2003; Hulett, 2004; Kuh and Gonyea, 2006; Smith, 2003; Smith and Denton, 2005; Smith and Snell, 2009) and the meaning making practices involved in religion (Eakle, 2007; Prothero, 2007) matter to a great many people in the United States. Prothero (2007), for example, argues that religion is a fundamental part of American society, and that if anyone hopes to learn about literature, art, architecture, or to understand politicians and public figures – who routinely use religious images, metaphors, and language – then one must understand religion and religious literacies. Research suggests that nearly 70% of youth in the United States are *at least* moderately religious (Regnerus, Smith, Fritsch, 2003; Smith and Denton, 2005). Sixty percent indicate that religion is “pretty” or “very” important to them (Wallace, Forman, Caldwell, Willis, 2003), and about 35% are *highly* religious (Regnerus, Smith, Fritsch, 2003; Smith and Denton, 2005). Indeed, religion is an important part of many youths'

lives (Wallace and Williams, 1997), perhaps second only to parents in terms of influence (Lerman, 1998).

It is not surprising, then, that religious beliefs and practices also influence the development and use of literate practices (Baquedano-Lopez, 2000; Farr, 2000; Kapitzke, 1995; Poveda, Cano, and Palomares-Valera, 2005; Sarroub, 2002; Zinsser, 1986). These practices can be highly influential in terms of how youth structure their experiences in and out of school (Sarroub, 2002) the development of their identities (Akom, 2003; Baquedano-López, 2000; Sarroub, 2003; Williams, 2005) and their learning (Heath, 1983; Poveda, Cano, and Palomares-Valera, 2005; Zinsser, 1986).

In terms of learning, engagement and motivation are also important (Cambourne, 1995; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004; Guthrie and Anderson, 1999; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriguez, 1998). The National Council of Teachers of English identified motivation as one of the key elements for successfully promoting youth literacy (2007). Snow and Biancarosa (2003) argued that in order for youth to experience literacy success they “must . . . develop and maintain motivation to read and learn” (p.6). Indeed, the importance of engagement and motivation may be difficult to overstate. As research has shown, when youth are motivated to engage in literate practices inside and outside of school they tend to persevere when difficulties arise (Alvermann, Young, Green, and Wisenbaker, 1999; Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, and Cox, 1999; Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2003), which can help them as they engage in particularly challenging literacy tasks such as reading complex texts. Some educators have argued that engagement is *the* key factor in literacy learning (Cambourne, 1995; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000); the mediator between instructional processes and student outcomes (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000); and that without engagement, learning would not occur despite a text’s

richness or a teacher's expertise (Cambourne, 1995). Engagement and motivation, then, are key literacy constructs, but what about their relationship in the literate lives of religious youth?

Statement of the Problem

This dissertation explores the intersection of motivation, literacy, and religion. The central purpose of this dissertation is to understand what motivates youth to develop and use religious literate practices as part of their religious identities, and what educators can learn from these youth in terms of literacy motivation. To accomplish this, this study explores the relationships that exist among Latter-day Saint¹ and Methodist youths' literate practices and their religiously-situated beliefs, values, and purposes, and how they relate to motivation. To operationalize this purpose, I use the following guiding questions:

1. What are these youths' religious literate practices?
2. How do contexts influence motivation for literacy?
3. What motivations for literacy can be drawn from texts?
4. What motivations for literacy do the youth bring with them into religious literate practices?

These questions are organized according to the dominant theoretical model of literate practice (RAND, 2002; Ruddell and Unrau, 2004). The learner-text-context model is composed of the three titular core elements, which are surrounded by a larger context. The elements are separated in the model to draw attention to them. In theory and practice, however, they are integrated. *Learners*, for example, engage with *texts* in particular *contexts* in literacy learning, which are surrounded by larger political and cultural contexts. In this dissertation I focus on

¹ Individuals who belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are commonly referred to as Mormons, in reference to one of their books of scripture, the Book of Mormon. They are also referred to as Latter-day Saints. The Church recognizes and accepts both references, but prefers the latter ("The Name of the Church," n.d.).

these elements, and the relationships among them, to better understand youths' religious literate practices and motivations.

Significance of the Study

This study provides an important perspective on motivation and literacy by exploring the motivations for literacy of religious youth. This study is significant because it (a) addresses the call for more qualitative work in motivation, (b) highlights students' voices in literacy research, and (c) develops knowledge about conceptualizations of Christian youth as readers and writers that may inform literacy instruction in various domains.

This study addresses the call for more qualitative work in the motivational research (Blumenfeld, 1992; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, Paris, 2004; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000). Educators see the need for sustained, in-depth qualitative work that deepens our understanding of youths' literate practices and motivations in various contexts. This dissertation addresses this call by using extended observations, in-depth interviews, and rich descriptions of religious environments to understand what motivated these youth for literacy learning. Moreover, this study employs a learner-text-context theoretical model (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Ruddell and Unrau, 2004) that has rarely been used to explore motivated literacy (Moje, 2006).

In addition, educators have called, and continue to call, for increased attention to youths' voices in educational research (Erickson and Shultz, 1992; Intrator and Kunzman, 2009; Nieto, 1994; Pope, 2001). In their review of what educators can learn from listening to youths' voices, Intrator and Kunzman (2009) state simply, "Adults must be willing to provide time and space to listen to what kids have to tell them" (p.43). Others agree (Alvermann, 1998; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Hersch, 1999; Oldfather, 1993), calling for youths' voices to be heard as we attempt to learn as much as we can from them about their views on and experiences with education. However, educators have heard very few religious youths' voices when it comes to

motivations for literacy. What do they have to say? What is important to them? This dissertation aims to find out by situating religious youth as the primary informants of the study and exploring *their* experiences with literacy, religion, and motivation.

By identifying these youths' literate practices and their motivations for literacy, educators in classrooms, afterschool programs, and community organizations may be better informed and prepared to develop more effective instructional practices that may be informed by these youths' social and cultural practices. For example, educators may be able to develop practices that may influence one's persistence in the face of difficult texts; or practices that resonate with other youth with strong cultural commitments for literacy. I am not arguing for the uncritical incorporation of youths' literacy practices or motivations for literacy into literacy instruction; rather, I argue that because practicing Christian youth are often committed to literacy practices involving complex texts and tend to do well academically (Muller and Ellison, 2001; Parcel and Geschwender, 1995; Regnerus, 2000) educators may want to study them to better understand what it is about their literate practices and motivations that may contribute to our thinking about literacy learning in the classroom and in other domains.

Theorizing Central Constructs

To address this study's main and guiding questions, I identify how I am using the central constructs and their relationships to one another. I begin with *religion* and *spirituality*, drawing on the literature produced by researchers in the field of the psychology of religion. I argue for the use of *religion* in this study because it situates the search for the sacred within specific sacred contexts. I also discuss *literacy* as a social practice, and conceptualize *religious literacies* as the socially-situated ways religious individuals use religious texts and practices to make meaning. Finally, I conceptualize *motivation for literacy* in terms of individuals, texts, and contexts.

The Sacred, Religiousness, and Spirituality

In his historic work with the Australian Arunta aborigines, Durkheim (1912) did not equate the sacred with divinity as represented by gods or supernatural powers; rather, the sacred was sacred because it was set apart from other things, namely, the profane. To understand what is sacred, then, is to understand what is profane, and vice versa. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto (1917) used the Latin *numinous* to describe the power, presence, and majesty of the holy, or sacred. The numinous is not understood, nor can be understood, in terms of other experiences. It is truly “out of this world.” For Otto, the numinous is comprised of two concepts joined in the phrase *mysterium tremendum*. *Mysterium* refers to the wholly otherness of the numinous that is completely outside of everyday experiences. It captures one’s total enrapture with the numinous. *Tremendum* refers to the awe-inspiring quality of the numinous and the overpowering humility it creates in individuals. For Otto, experiencing the numinous produces feelings of profound unworthiness and a sense of the insignificance of everyday life. He called this the “feeling of absolute profaneness” (p.51).

Eliade (1957) argued for the existence of sacred space, time, nature, and self. Using religious man and non-religious man to demonstrate how sets of individuals might understand the sacred and profane, Eliade discussed such sacred spaces as home, temple, and cosmos, and the sacred time invoked during religious rituals or festivals. For Eliade, Durkheim, and Otto, the sacred exists in opposition to the ordinary. Indeed, the sacred-profane polarity may be a common religious construct (Durkheim, 1912), yet what counts as sacred and profane varies from one person (or context) to another. For some, the body (as a temple) is sacred. For others the body (as impure) is profane. For some, their responsibilities (as spouses or parents) are sacred, as well as relationships (with God and others), global issues (climate change or food shortages), and even literacy (Zinnbauer and Pargament, 2005). If the sacred is understood in

opposition to the profane, then, as Durkheim states, “anything can be sacred” that is set apart from the ordinary (1915, p.52). For this dissertation I conceptualize the *sacred as that which stands in contrast to the profane*. Because this may differ from one culture to another conceptions of the sacred will come from the study’s participants themselves.

The sacred is important to the constructs of religion and spirituality (Hill et al., 2000). Hill and his colleagues argue that religion and spirituality both have two primary components: (a) a notion of the sacred, and (b) a search for the sacred. Religion, however, includes two additional components absent in spirituality, namely, a search for the non-sacred (hope, a sense of self and community, and security), and a set of methods for searching for the sacred (rites and rituals such as baptism, communion, and marriage). Drawing upon these notions of sacred, religion, and spirituality, I define spirituality as *a broad lens through which individuals search for the sacred* (Pargament 1997, 1999; Zinnbauer and Pargament, 2005). This involves identifying, articulating, and maintaining the sacred in one’s life (Hill, et. al, 2000). Literacy may be one tool that individuals search for the sacred, therefore, one may profitably study spiritual literacies.

I define religiousness, or the quality of being religious, as *the specific practices related to the search for the (non-)sacred as they occur within the contexts of specific religious traditions* (Pargament 1997, 1999). Literacy in relation to religion, then, has to do with the specific literate practices related to the (non-)sacred that individuals develop and use in specific, organizationally based sacred contexts. This may include physical contexts, such as churches, and the larger ideological contexts of specific religious traditions. One way religious literacies are distinct from spiritual literacies is that spiritual literacies encompass religious literacies. Also, spiritual literacies are more abstract than religious literacies, which are based on specific religious traditions, such as Christianity. For example, religious literacies in Christianity are situated in and/or associated with specific sacred contexts, such as religious institutions and

belief structures, and specific sacred texts and practices, such as the Bible, scripture reading, and prayer, and may be enacted for non-sacred purposes such as community fellowship. Spiritual literacies, however, provide a broader, more conceptual construct that may not necessarily coordinate with specific religious contexts, or use specific sacred texts, or engage in specific practices that coincide with a specific religious tradition or purposes. In relationship to Christianity, spiritual literacies may be situated in non-Christian sacred contexts such as healing groups, or music or dance performances and may involve non-Christian sacred practices and texts such as yoga or palm reading.²

The distinction between religiousness and spirituality is important for this dissertation because the youth involved in this study attend specific denominational congregations and engage in specific organizationally based religious practices, such as prayer, with specific, organizationally appropriate texts, such as the Bible, within sacred contexts, such as churches, and for non-sacred purposes, such as fellowship. Given the religious practices, texts, contexts, and purposes in which these youth are engaged, *religion* is an appropriate construct to identify the nature of these youths' literate practices.³

"Religious background" refers to the degree (how much) and type (which religious traditions) of religion youth in this study experienced as they grew up. "Religious affiliation" refers to the current religious denominations in which these youth claim membership. Because this dissertation aims to study what motivates youths' religious literacies from a social and cultural perspective, an important part of this work is studying youth and their literacies within

² The characteristics of religiousness (in relationship to spirituality), namely, the organizationally based practices, searching for the non-sacred, and the more concrete notions involved in religiousness are consistent with recent research on individuals' conceptualizations of religiousness (Schlehofer, Omoto, and Adelman, 2008).

³ Notwithstanding the distinctions that I have argued for here (which are often posited by scholars) between religiousness and spirituality, in theory and practice religiousness and spirituality have important overlaps. In fact, in much of the recent research individuals describe themselves as both religious *and* spiritual (Corrigan et al., 2003; Marler and Zabriskie, 2005; Shahabi et al., 2002; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Although I focus on religious literacies in this study, arguing that *religious* is the appropriate term is not to suggest that these participants were *only* religious.

their institutional worship services and activities. Another important part of the study involves understanding the motivations for their religious literacies as they relate to their religious traditions or ideological systems. I turn now to the development of my conceptualizations of literacy.

A Social and Cultural Approach to Literacy

Social and cultural perspectives inform this dissertation. In particular, sociocultural theory and literacy theories drawn from social scientific fields such as anthropology have furthered my thinking about young peoples' interaction with texts in specific contexts. Sociocultural theory focuses on the dynamic interdependence of personal processes and social settings in the construction of knowledge (Luria, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978, 1981; Wertsch, 1995). From this perspective, individuals are not passive recipients of experiences; they are intentional agents who interact with the world and make sense of their experiences. Drawing attention to this individual/social connection, Luria (1981) explained that "one must seek the origins of conscious activity . . . not in the recesses of the human brain . . . , [but] in the external processes of social life, in the social and historical forms of human existence" (p.25). If all human activity occurs in social contexts, and if one aims to understand how people construct knowledge, then one must attend to those contexts, which are an important source of mental and physical processes (Vygotsky, 1978; Markus and Hamedani, 2007). Moreover, Vygotsky (1978) argued that individuals do not interact directly with their environments; instead, they use tools, or mediating devices, such as language and writing. These tools connect the individual and the social by giving individuals the means for making sense of their experiences and extracting knowledge from their surroundings; in this way transforming their thoughts and their experiences in and of the world. The sociocultural perspective provides a powerful way of

viewing the relationship between the individual and society, which has influenced conceptualizations of literacy.

In his anthropological field work in Iran in the 1970s, Street (1984) conceptualized literacy as autonomous and ideological. The autonomous model views literacy as a technical and neutral skill for decoding print. This model assumes that literacy can be separated from time and place, and that Literacy (with a capital *L* and a *y*) itself – autonomously – has consequences apart from the context in which it functions. Literacy becomes an independent variable that can be associated with social progress and economic stability (Gee, 1996). The autonomous model masks the ideological assumptions that undergird it, treating them as if they were natural or universal. It privileges one conception of literacy, suggesting that one size really does fit all. In contrast, the ideological model of literacy is concerned with understanding literacy in terms of social practices that are always embedded in relations of power. Here, Literacy (with a capital *L* and a single *y*) gives way to literacies (lowercase *l* and plural), signifying that there is no single, universal model of what it means to be literate; rather, there “are competing models and assumptions about reading and writing processes” (Street, 1995, p.132-33). Literacy, from this view, is sensitive to cultural contexts. It claims that literacy is a social practice used to make meaning rather than a neutral and technical skill.

Viewing literacy from an ideological perspective as a social practice means that the literate practices of individuals emerge out of and are influenced by the societies in which they exist (Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). Literacy, from this perspective, is a mediating device for making sense of one’s environment and experiences at particular times, in particular places, and for particular purposes. Individuals, then, do not simply read. They read particular types of texts (the Bible), at particular times (early in the morning, or after a tragic event), in particular ways (aloud) and places (church), for particular purposes (to find answers to

important questions). What counts as literacy, then, shifts from one context to another and can only be understood *in context* (Gee, 1996; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street, 1984).

Because, dialectically, literacy gives meaning to situations and situations give meaning to literacy, there is no literacy “in any meaningful sense . . . outside of social practice” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2007, p.2). Religious congregations, for example, are socially constructed contexts with their own beliefs, structures, practices, and demands. Youth who attend, say, a Methodist church, use language and literacy to learn and make sense of the particular beliefs, structures, practices, and demands of their religious tradition as they read and discuss particular texts and engage in particular activities. Furthermore, what counts as literacy in a Methodist – or any – church is influenced by the context of the church, and to some extent, from congregation to congregation. Literacy in Sunday school, for example, may include being able to read a Bible passage aloud and talk about how it applies to one’s life, whereas in congregational worship services literacy may include the ability to engage appropriately in antiphonal readings with the pastor and the congregation. These readings, however, may differ from one congregation to another in the same religious tradition, depending on the demands of the given contexts. These examples demonstrate how literacy helps one make sense of contexts, and how contexts help determine what counts as literate practice. These examples also suggest that one cannot decontextualize literacy and hope to understand what it is and how it works in the lives of individuals and groups (Street, 1984, 1995, 2003).

Literacy Practices. Literacy practices are important for understanding the connection between the acts of reading, writing, and speaking and the social and cultural structures that influence them, and which in turn, literacy practices influence (Barton and Hamilton, 2000). In this study I conceptualize practices as more than simply observable, repetitive, or common activities performed to promote learning. According the Barton and Hamilton (2000):

[P]ractices are the social processes which connect people with one another, and they include shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities. Practices are shaped by social rules which regulate the use and distribution of texts . . . [Practices] straddle the distinction between individuals and social worlds (p.7-8).

This statement captures the social aspect of practices and the nature of their relationship in connecting the individual and the social. Literacy practices, in what Street (1993) called “the simplest sense” are what we “do with literacy” (p.12), but it is, of course, more complex than that. Literacy practices include behaviors, concepts, attitudes, and values that individuals bring with them that give the practices meaning (Street, 1999). Street (1993) stated that literacy practices are more abstract than observable behaviors, and that literacy practices refer “to both behavior and conceptualisations related to the use of reading and/or writing” (p. 12), in particular contexts. Literacy practices are, therefore, complex social phenomena that are nested within and influenced by “the broader social and cultural conceptions of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts” (Street, 2003, p.79). *In a word, literacy practices are the ways individuals conceptualize and enact literacy, as influenced by their social and cultural histories.* Individuals may discard, change, or develop new literacy practices over their lifetimes as a result of their experiences in the world. This is to say, literacy practices are socially constructed, and fluid. In this study, I explore religious youths’ literacy practices and the motivations that drive them.

Conceptualization of Texts. From a sociocultural perspective texts may be any communicative media, not simply words on paper (Flood and Lapp, 1995; Scribner and Cole, 1981). In their argument for an expanded conceptualization of literacy as a communicative act, Flood and Lapp (1995) broaden traditional cognitive definitions of text (with their focus on print) by stating that texts must make way for “new access channels for students that include

television, film, video, and computer technologies” (p.4). Moje (2008) stated that from a sociocultural perspective “texts include the written, the spoken, the pictorial, and the performed” (p.208). Others have defined texts as “organized networks that people generate or use to make meaning either for themselves or for others” (Wade and Moje, 2000, p.610). From a sociocultural perspective, I view texts to include *a variety of symbol systems such as print, speech, pictorials, and film that people use to make meaning*. Texts, from this view, are tools created in social contexts and used for social purposes, such as developing and maintaining social connections, making sense of one’s environment, producing knowledge, and enacting one’s sense of self (Heath, 1983). I focus on religious texts and those that youth produce for religious purposes, or those whose production is influenced by religious traditions or values.

What Literacy is Not. The sociocultural conceptualization of literacy represents literacy as an extensive and complex social practice that involves broad concepts such as meaning making and context. In order to further understand what literacy is, it may be helpful to understand what literacy is *not*. As has been argued here, literacy involves the social practices of sense making that people engage in for specific purpose, in specific contexts. However, literacy is not any and every attempt at communicating. Moje (2008) described literacy as “the work that people do to make sense of symbol systems” (p.208). She also stated that “literacies include all of the social practices and forms of representation and communication (oral, visual, and performed) that revolve around making sense of written texts” (2008, p.208). Literacy, then, includes the use of an inscribed symbolic system of representation, like an alphabet, music notations, mathematical symbols, or speech to make meaning of texts (broadly defined). If one cannot interpret the symbol system, although the actual literate practice may be utilized appropriately, then communication may not occur, and the making of meaning may be suspect.

In this regard, one cannot claim that the act of meaning making was not a literate practice, only that the communication of meaning may not have happened.

For example, if I am in a church and I see a poster printed in a language that I do not recognize, I may try to make sense of the words on the poster using my knowledge of alphabetic print. If the poster is written in Romanian, and I do not speak Romanian, then I cannot read – or make sense – of the words on the poster. Because my attempt at decoding the words of an unfamiliar language failed to produce meaning of the words written in that language, my attempt at using a literate practice – such as decoding – was not successful. In other words, although actually decoding the symbols may be a literate practice, I did not make sense of the meaning of the symbols, so in that sense, literacy – or, making sense of a text in a particular context – did not occur.

However, if I look beyond the printed texts to (a) the bright colors on the poster, (b) the manner in which the text is inscribed, (c) the poster's pictorial representation of a bearded man with a halo of light and what appears to be a book in his hand, (d) the Romanian Orthodox church in which the poster is situated, and (e) I recall that it is the month of March I may be able to conclude that this particular poster has a statement to make about a particularly important issue in the Church, perhaps the celebration of Jesus' resurrection. This attempt at making sense of the poster would be a literate practice. I was able to draw upon visual, print, religious, and cultural knowledge and representations to make sense of the larger social and religious role the poster may have played. However, I still may not be able to read the actual words on the poster. One of the key differences in these two literate practices is that one produced meaning (the latter) and one did not (the former).

Although literate practices were employed in both attempts, by trying to make sense of the alphabetic print and not succeeding (as in the first attempt), no meaning of the print was

made; however, even though no meaning of the printed words, per se, was made in the second attempt, knowledge of the social and religious role the poster may have played in this particular context was developed. In this regard, because meaning was made about the poster in general, the literacy practice was successful. In a word, although literate practices may be employed in the process of meaning making, literacy does not occur when there is no communication of meaning.

Consistent with the sociocultural and ideological perspectives of literacy, I conceptualize literacy in this dissertation as *social practice involving text that people use to make meaning, for particular purposes, in particular contexts*. This perspective allows me to study the literate practices of individuals in religious contexts by attending to their reading, writing, speaking, and meaning-making in these contexts and also the influences of the religious contexts on individuals' literate practices and motivations for these practices. With the constructs of religion, literacy, and literacy practices in mind, I now turn to my conceptualization of religious literacies.

Religious Literacies

The study of religious literacies, from a sociocultural perspective, is the study of a particular cultural manifestation of literacy; specifically, the study of religion as cultural practice among religious individuals. This includes the ways religious individuals read, write, reason, and navigate their experiences. Religion as cultural practice can only be understood through the meanings that individuals make in and by those cultures. As such, religious literacies honor and attend to individuals' knowledge and ways of knowing and doing. This perspective holds that literate practices are embedded in social interactions in a variety of contexts. These contexts inform and are informed by individuals' religious literacies, and are situations where such

elements as texts, rituals, the various manifestations of the contexts, and the individuals themselves, work together to create knowledge.

In a broad sense, religious literacies are the shared ways religious individuals come to know the world and find a place in it. More specifically, I conceptualize religious literacies as the *social practices involving texts that religious individuals develop and use to make meaning in particular places and for particular purposes as part of their religious beliefs, experiences, practices, and values*. Religious literacies, then, are concerned with the (a) social practices involving texts that are (b) related to meaning-making, and (c) associated with individuals' religiously situated beliefs, experiences, practices, and values. Prayer may be a good example of a religious literacy. Although prayer can simply be a religious practice – a demonstration or development of one's religious commitments – it may also be an example of religious literacy. As one prays at the death of a close friend, for instance, one is involved in a social practice involving text (speaking to God, perhaps aloud), related to meaning-making (finding solace or insight), that is associated with one's religiously situated beliefs (God hears and answers prayers) and values (peace in times of crises). This is a general example of prayer as a religious literate practice. As influenced by various social and cultural forces, actual practices and purposes may differ by individual and religious groups.

This view of religious literacies is consistent with Kapitzke's (1995) characterization of religious literacies as "social activities that assemble composites of writing instruments, texts, social practices, and beliefs about text, the world, and the individual's place in that world" (p.118). This definition captures the *social and constructed* nature of religious literacies by allowing for the influence of religious activities, texts, practices, and beliefs in meaning making. Religious individuals engage in this meaning making through reading, writing, talking, praying, acting, and a host of other ways that coincide with who they are or want to be and their

religious cultures and traditions. Religious individuals may, for example, use religious vocabulary, devices such as symbols, metaphors and images, doctrines, practices, rituals, narratives, and canonical and other texts to make meaning.

Motivation for Literacy: Learner, Text, and Context

The learner, text, context theoretical model (Moje, 2006; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Ruddell and Unrau, 2004; Rumelhart, 1994) and various conceptualizations of reading motivation (Guthrie et al., 1996; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; Mathewson, 1994/2004) inform my conceptualization of motivation for literacy in this dissertation. Drawing on psychological research on motivation, educational researchers have largely conceptualized motivation for literacy in terms of such psychological constructs as goals, beliefs, interests, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, expectancies, and values and their relationship to reading and writing. As such, much of this work has drawn from goal theories (Ames, 1992), self-efficacy theories (Bandura, 1997), intrinsic motivation theories (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Deci and Ryan, 1985), interest theories (Hidi, 1990; Alexander et al., 1994), and achievement motivation theories (Atkinson, 1958, 1964; Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000, 2002).

Guthrie et al. (1996), for example, conceptualized motivation for reading from a goal-oriented perspective as “internalized goals that lead to literacy choice” (p.309). Mathewson (1994/2004) conceptualized motivation in terms of intention, stating that motivation for reading is the “development of the conditions promoting intention to read” where intention is the “commitment to a plan for achieving” particular reading purposes (p.1439). Others argue that reading motivation consists of the “personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading” (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000, p.405). Some of the more common motivation constructs related to literacy are goals, task-values (including interest), intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation.

Goals have to do with the “purpose and meaning of an action or situation” (Anderman and Maehr, 1994, p.294). Although goals may take various forms (Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriquez, 1998), the motivation literature identifies two broad goal orientations or dispositions toward learning. Performance goals (Ames, 1992; Dweck and Leggett, 1988) are concerned with completing a task, demonstrating one’s ability, and receiving high marks. Mastery goals (Ames, 1992; Dweck and Leggett, 1988) value effort and dedication to understanding. Success is understood in terms of improvement and progress. With regard to literacy, one’s goal orientation represents one’s general disposition for certain types of goals – performance or mastery, for example – when engaging in literacy activities, such as reading, writing, or speaking. Wigfield (1997) argues that goal orientation in reading has to do with whether one wants to be a successful reader, and why (or why not).

Interest is characterized as one’s feelings about a “particular person, object, or activity” (Alexander and Jetton, 2000, p.297) as well as improved attention and concentration (Hidi, 2006). Interest can be distinguished between personal interest and situational interest. Krapp, Hidi, and Renninger (1992) describe personal interests as “relatively stable, and . . . usually associated with increased knowledge, positive emotions, and increased reference value” (p.5). Personal interest is usually associated with topics, tasks, or subject matter material (Alexander and Jetton, 2000; Alexander, Jetton, and Kulikowich, 1996), and may have powerful cognitive and affective influences (Alexander, 1997; Hidi, 2006). It is also related to deep-level learning from texts – identifying main ideas and responding to meaningful comprehension questions – more strongly than surface-level learning (Schiefele, 1996a, 1996b). Situational interest, however, is short-lived, and influenced primarily by one’s immediate environment (Alexander, Kulikowich, and Jetton, 1994; Krapp, Hidi, and Renninger, 1992). It may serve to get an individual’s attention, and may therefore help generate students’ curiosity in a topic or task

(Alexander, 1997), but it is often bounded by time. Nevertheless, it may lead to the development of longer-term, individual interest (Krapp, Hidi, and Renninger, 1992).

Intrinsic motivation is concerned with individuals' involvement in literacy tasks, based on personal interest (Deci, 1992). Intrinsically motivated individuals find certain tasks interesting for their own sake (Hidi, 2000). They also read more frequently (Baker and Wigfield, 1999) and tend to persist when difficulties arise (Deci, 1992). Intrinsic motivation for literacy represents both interest in literacy activities *and* an inclination to be involved in these activities (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000). Extrinsic motivation is concerned with external rewards or goals (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan, 1991). When individuals engage in literate practices to meet social expectations such as pleasing a friend or an adult they are motivated extrinsically (Deci et al., 1991). Literacy for extrinsically motivated individuals is a means to an end (Wigfield, 1997). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, however, are not polar opposites. They both have a role in encouraging individuals to engage in literate activities (Wang and Guthrie, 2004; Wigfield, 1997). These views and constructs of motivated literacy share a legacy rooted in psychology, with its attention to the individual; however, from a sociocultural perspective the individual is not the entire source of motivation for literacy.

It also takes certain types of texts, within certain contexts, to influence motivation for literacy. The learner, text, context theoretical model argues for the place of these three elements in the construction of knowledge. The learner refers to the individual and what he brings to the learning process. Text refers to elements within the text such as structures, features, genre (conventions), and the organized systems of meaning that shape reading, writing, speech, and action. Context includes the environment, purpose, social relations, and cultural norms, such as reside in schools, families, and peer groups. Drawing on this model, Moje (2006) argues for a view of motivated literacy that incorporates texts and contexts as

salient features. She states that motivation may be “less a static and singular feature of [individuals] and more a feature of the texts and contexts . . . [experienced] in and out of school” (p.13). From this view, motivated literacy may be influenced by individuals goals or interests, for example, and by features of texts and contexts (see Eccles, Wigfield, and Schiefele, 1998; Reeve, 2006; Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriguez, 1998 for a discussion of the role of context in motivation).

Indeed, texts and contexts are important constructs of motivation for literacy research (Cambourne, 1988, 1995; Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie and Wigfield, 1997, 2000; Ivey, 1998; Oldfather, 1993; Turner, 1995; Turner and Paris, 1995). This includes one’s community context (Alvermann, Young, Green, and Wisenbaker, 1999; Cambourne, 1988, 1995; Moje et al., 2008) and the classroom context (Gambrell, 1996; Ivey, 1998; Oldfather, 1992, 1993). “Motivated literacy” (McCaslin, 1990), then, may be influenced by what one reads, writes, does, or the situation one is in. One may, therefore, be motivated for literacy because the context or the text resonates with one’s inner motivational constructs. Given the importance of individuals, texts, and contexts in motivation for literacy, I conceptualize motivation for literacy as *(a) individuals’ inner motivational constructs, such as goals and interest that are related to (b) texts, topics, and literacy practices, as situated in (c) particular contexts, all of which may be religious in nature.*

The Researcher’s Role

The researcher has important responsibilities in social scientific research (Patton, 2002). His responsibilities go beyond simply collecting, analyzing, and reporting data. Strauss (1987) argued that he “can and should *care* very deeply about [his] work” (p.9), and be “unafraid to draw on [his] own experiences” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.5). But what are my commitments and experiences as they relate to this work? And how do they influence it?

Of importance is my personal identification as a practicing Christian. I affirm a personal belief in the fundamental tenet of Christianity, namely that Jesus is the Christ and that through faith in him I may gain eternal life (John 17:3). Insofar as any of the youth in this study affirmed similar beliefs and values we may be said to share them. I am also a practicing Latter-day Saint, and as such affirm a personal belief in the tenets of Mormonism, namely that God, through Joseph Smith, restored the Church established by Jesus Christ, and that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that Church. I also affirm that the Church is led by Christ through modern prophets. Insofar as any of the Latter-day Saints in this study affirmed similar beliefs or values we may be said to share them. As a practicing Christian/Latter-day Saint I regularly attended Sunday worship services and participated by praying, teaching lessons, and giving talks. I also studied scripture and prayed regularly on my own. I knew all of the Latter-day Saint youth personally, having served in leadership roles in the congregation including as a Sunday school teacher to many of the youth. My religious affiliations, values, and practices as a Christian and Latter-day Saint, as well as my relationship with the Latter-day Saint youth influenced aspects of this study, including data collection and analyses. I discuss this more fully in Chapter 3 when I describe my methodological processes.

Summary

In this chapter I provided a background for this study by discussing the importance of effective literacy teaching and learning, the influence of religious literacies in youths' lives, and the role of motivation in literacy learning. I also articulated this study's purpose – to identify Christian youths' motivations for developing and using literacy – and the guiding questions that operationalize this purpose. I have identified the significance of this work and theorized my view of its central constructs. Specifically, I conceptualize religion as the search for the sacred within traditional sacred contexts, using traditional sacred texts and practices. I view literacy in this

study from a social and cultural perspective as the socially situated practices used to make meaning. I, therefore, view religious literacy as the social meaning making practices religious individuals develop and use as part of their religious traditions and practices. And finally, I conceptualize motivation for literacy as individuals' inner motivational constructs related to literacy, as situated in particular contexts. These constructs guide the remained of this work.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation proceeds, in Chapter Two, with a review of the relevant empirical studies conducted on motivation for literacy, literacies in social contexts, and religious literacies. In Chapter Three, I present the methods, including the participants, the data generation and analysis methods, and techniques used to enhance the credibility of this study. In Chapter Four I present my conceptualization of the embedded contexts of literacy and motivation for literacy guiding this work. In Chapter Five I present the contextual factors that motivated youth for religious literacies. In Chapter Six I identify the youths' religious literate practices. Chapters Seven and Eight include the textual and reader factors, respectively, that motivated for religious literacies. In the final chapter I draw some conclusions and offer educational implications of this work as well as some of the study's limitations. I conclude with suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2

Related Empirical Studies

Building upon the theoretical foundation laid in the previous chapter, this chapter develops a research-based rationale for studying religious youths' motivation for literacy by reviewing the empirical studies related to motivation for literacy, literacies in social contexts, and religious literacies.

Motivation for Literacy

Studies of motivation for literacy are a relatively recent phenomenon, rarely conducted before the 1990s (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000). According to the International Reading Association's *Annual Summary of Investigations Relating to Reading* (Gambrell, 1996) between 1985 and 1992 only nine literacy studies were conducted each year related to motivation. This is despite the fact that educators agree that motivation is central to literacy learning (O'Flahavan et al., 1992; Kamil, 2003). In this section I review the recent literature on motivation for literacy, demonstrating that individuals may bring motivation, but that motivation is also influenced by one's interactions with texts, within various social contexts.

Drawing from the general motivational literature and the literature on reading attitudes and motivation, Wigfield and Guthrie (1995) offered eleven dimensions of reading motivation and explored how these related to students' reading behaviors. From their 82-item Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ) they found that students' amount of reading was related to intrinsic and extrinsic reasons – curiosity (intrinsic), aesthetic enjoyment (intrinsic), grades (extrinsic), and recognition (extrinsic) – with the intrinsic reasons carrying more weight.

A few years later, using a refined 54-item version of the MRQ, Baker and Wigfield (1999) examined the relationship between 371 fifth- and sixth-grade students' motivation for reading and their reading activity and achievement. Using confirmatory factor analysis the researchers found that African Americans and females reported stronger motivation for reading than others. They also found that females and Caucasian students had stronger relationships between reading motivation and reading achievement. As suggested by this work, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for reading can help explain the relationship between motivation and such constructs as reading behaviors and achievement.

A student's response to the question, "Do I want to be a good reader?" (Wigfield, 1997), for example, may be driven by intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Such is the hypothesis of the Motivational Structural Model of Text Comprehension (Wang and Guthrie, 2004), which represents the relationships among intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, as well as other factors such as amount of reading for school and for pleasure, past reading achievement, and text comprehension. Using structural equation modeling, the authors' developed structural models of the extent to which intrinsic and extrinsic motivation correlated with U.S. (187) and Chinese (197) fourth-grade students' text comprehension. They found that intrinsic motivation predicted text comprehension for both groups of students; whereas, extrinsic motivation was negatively correlated to text comprehension for both groups. This dissertation focused on older youth, but Wang and Guthrie's findings are instructive.

Another useful measure of motivation for reading is the Motivation to Read Profile (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzoni, 1996), which includes two instruments: the reading survey, used to assess students' self-concepts as readers and the value they place on reading, and the conversational interview, used to assess students' motivation for reading various types of texts. The MRP was designed for use with elementary students, but recently, researchers

have adapted it for use with older youth (Pitcher, 2007). Maintaining the MRP's focus on measuring students' self-concepts as readers and their value of reading, Pitcher and her colleagues found that of their geographically and culturally diverse sample of 384 young people (6th-10th grades) females valued reading more highly than males. Females' value of reading also increased with grade level, whereas males' decreased. There were no gender, grade, or cultural group differences in self-concept. These, and other, studies (Guthrie et al., 1996; Wigfield and Guthrie, 1997) suggest the importance of individuals' inner motivational constructs in motivation for literacy. However, context also matters in this research.

As a teacher, Cambourne (1988, 1995) noticed that some of his students struggled to learn the "simplest concepts" in school, but learned and applied complex knowledge in out-of-school contexts. Through the author's work with these students, he developed principles of engagement that suggested students are more likely to engage with language learning if (a) they think they are "capable of learning," (b) what they are learning is important for them, (c) they are free from anxiety, and (d) they are taught by people they want to emulate.

Similarly, Oldfather (1993) identified four elements that influence students' motivation for literacy in her work with a classroom of fifth and sixth grade students. The four elements were self-expression, constructing meaning, choice, and teacher responsiveness. Self-expression allowed students to "link their learning activities with who they are, how they think, and what they care about" (p.674). A rich and nurturing classroom environment provided a context for students to personally construct meaning, as did having choice in what to study and how to pace one's work. For these students, a responsive teacher was respectful and understanding, but she also had high expectations and explained things well. Although the length, quality, and duration of Oldfather's interviews and observations were unspecified, as were the analytical methods,

Oldfather and Cambourne demonstrated the centrality of students' motivation in literacy learning.

In a review of the studies conducted at the National Reading Research Center, Gambrell (1996) identified six characteristics of classrooms that foster reading motivation: teacher reading models, access to high-quality books in the classroom, choice, social interaction around books, familiarity with many books, and reading related incentives such as books. Likewise, Ivey (1998) identified three recurring themes in motivating middle school students to read that are aligned with the demands of young learners. These themes were (a) time to read, (b) access to good reading material, and (c) student-centered approaches to literacy instruction. When these factors work together, the author claims students have "a rich literacy environment in which to pursue their reading and writing interests" (p.53).

In more recent work, Lapp and Fischer (2009) argued for the motivational influence of (a) student choice in text, topic, and assignment selections, and (b) teacher and student interactions around texts. Over the course of a school year the authors (as teachers) and students engaged in a number of approaches to literacy using a variety of text genres focused on particular themes. Students who began the year reading reluctantly began to be more engaged in reading and literacy discussions as the year progressed. The authors attributed the students' increased motivation for reading to the students having the opportunity to select instructional texts and assignments that related to their own interests and the instructional and social "support to read, think, and share" (p.561).

Other researchers have reached similar conclusions about the manner in which youth experience literacy and its affect on motivation for literacy learning (Alvermann, Young, Green, Wisenbaker, 1999; Alvermann and Heron, 2001). Alvermann, Young, Green, and Wisenbaker (1999), for example, studied 20 youth involved in four 15-week reading and talk clubs,

concluding that these youths' sustained interest in attending and participating in the clubs was due to the fact that these avid readers were around like-minded individuals who enjoyed reading and talking about books. They were also motivated by the quality of the discussions in the clubs, which they characterized as "real," and "intellectually honest."

In a four-month, mixed methods study of 199 fifth grade students, McKool (2007) explored why some youth read voluntarily outside of school and others did not. Her work revealed that the homes of youth who read voluntarily had parents who (a) read with their children, (b) modeled recreational reading, (c) recommended books for their children, and (d) talked about books with their children. The parents of those youth who did not voluntarily read outside of school did not demonstrate these characteristics as readily. This work identifies some key social distinctions between motivated and unmotivated readers.

In a sub-sample of 18 6th to 9th graders, Strommen and Mates (2004) classified nine as readers and nine as not-readers. The researchers aimed to identify the factors that "contribute to and support a child's learning to love to read" (p.189). They found that readers had strong and supportive social structures around reading; they regularly talked about, read, and exchanged books with family and friends. Readers had access to a variety of reading material and continued the reading rituals that most of them had reported begun when they were younger. Readers also connected their love of reading to *outside* of school texts and contexts. A thread running through this study was the continuity of early social literacy practices. Those who were readers in later grades continued these early practices; not-readers did not.

In contrast to the short observational periods of many motivational studies, Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris (2008) report on a study that had been ongoing for nine years. Drawing from survey responses, reading diagnostics, school records, writing samples, interviews, and extended ethnographies of selected students, the authors aimed to challenge

some myths about youth and their reading practices. The authors found that 92% of these youth read a variety of genres out-of-school several times per week and that they were motivated readers and writers. Literacy, for these youth, developed social capital by providing them with important social networks, which, along with identities and goals motivated these youth to read outside of school. Their key finding was that motivation for literacy influenced and was influenced by social networks in the form of family literacy networks, affinity groups, writing clubs, peer talk about books, and popular cultural networks. This work raises important questions about the social networks in youths' lives and their role in motivating them for literacy learning. It also suggests the value of highlighting students' voices by using students' own words as evidence to support the study's conclusions.

Nieto (1994) argued that "students' perspectives are for the most part missing in discussions concerning strategies for confronting educational problems" (p.396). Certainly improving literacy motivation and learning is one such problem. In 1992 Erickson and Shultz concluded that "virtually no research has been done that places student experiences at the center of attention" (p. 467). More recently, Alvermann (1998) identified the irony of claiming to value youths' perspectives on literacy, but not including their voices in most studies about their literate practices. Some literacy researchers who study motivation, however, aim to understand what motivates youth to engage in literacy by highlighting youths' voices (Edmunds and Bauserman, 2006; Ivey and Broaddus, 2001; Oldfather, 1993; McKool, 2007; Strommen and Mates, 2004; see Intrator and Kunzman, 2009).

Oldfather (1993) did this by attending to the "deep responsiveness of the classroom culture to students' expressions" (p.672). She calls this deep responsiveness, "honored voice" (see also Oldfather, 1991a, 1991b) that has to do with empowering students to make choices, which gets them personally connected to and invested in literacy learning. Oldfather argued

that the key to the literacy success of these highly motivated students was the teacher's "deep responsiveness to students' self-expression – to their ideas, opinions, feelings, needs, interests, hopes, and dreams" (p.674).

Others have highlighted youths' voices simply by talking to them. Strommen and Mates (2004), for example, talked to students in order to identify the factors that "contribute to and support a child's learning to love to read" (p.189). Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) likewise aimed to learn about youths' motivations for reading by talking to them. Using the Conversational Interview portion of the Motivation to Read Profile (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzoni, 1996), the authors interviewed 16 fourth graders to understand what motivated them to read. They found that personal interest, knowledge gained from texts, choice, and the characteristics of texts were important factors. They also found that school, family (mothers, in particular), and peers were rich sources of motivation for reading, and that being told about books that others are reading, being read to, and receiving books as gifts motivated them as well.

In a much larger study of 1,765 6th graders, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) wondered what motivated these students to read in their English language arts classrooms. Explicitly aiming to "foreground their voices," (p. 355), the authors followed up the surveys with 31 personal interviews with motivated readers. Using descriptive statistics and content analysis, Ivey and Broaddus found that in their ELA classrooms the students most valued time to read, teacher read-alouds, and time to think about their reading. These students were motivated to read for personal reasons, and by having access to interesting reading material, a supportive classroom contexts, and choice about what they could read. The authors suggest that instead of asking about what motivates youth to engage in literate practices, a better approach might be to ask how educators can use literacy instruction to *address* students' motivations for literacy. This

approach suggests that students arrive in classrooms with motivations for literacy already in place and that as educators we would do well to identify these motivations and find ways to connect to them. One way to do this is to talk to students (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Intrator and Kunzman, 2009) about their motivations for literacy.

This body of research demonstrates that although aspects of motivation for literacy may appear to inhere in the individual, motivation for literacy is not isolated to internal constructs; rather, it stems from one's interactions with others around texts and literacy activities, in various social contexts.

Literacy in Social Contexts

Literacy research situated in individuals' lived experiences has given rise to a number of works exploring the literate practices of many segments of society, including African Americans (Heath, 1983; Nasire, 2000), adolescent girls (Finders, 1996, 1997; Guzzetti, 2009; Guzzetti and Gamboa, 2004; Marsh and Stolle, 2006), Latinos/Latinas (Guerra and Farr, 2002; Martínez-Roldán and Fránquiz, 2009), youth involved with computer technologies (Black, 2007; Lewis and Fabos, 2005; Thomas, 2007; Wilder and Dressman, 2006), West African communities (Scribner and Cole, 1981), consumers of popular media (Alvermann and Heron, 2001; Neilsen, 1998, 2006; Skinner, 2007; Stone, 2007), and even gangs (Aguilar, 2000; MacGillivray and Curwen, 2007; Miller, 2002; Moje, 2000). In each of these works, literacy is explored within the contexts of these individuals' lives. In this section I review the empirical research in which literacy is conducted within social contexts.

In her landmark work, *Ways with Words* (1983), Heath begins geographically with a representation of the Carolina Piedmont, then moves into its cultural, political, and industrial history. These establishing introductory descriptions serve to place the culture of these towns and their residents within their collective and individual history, creating and explaining the

contextual spaces. These descriptions also foreground the fundamental importance of society in Heath's discussion of language and literacy. Indeed, *Ways with Words* is about context, specifically about individuals' learning of language and literacy as situated within home and community. Indeed, context, texts, and people are often so closely linked in much of current literacy research and practice that it becomes difficult to talk about one without talking about the others (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Ruddell and Unrau, 2004). "The biggest insight of Heath's research" says Prendergast (2003) "is that to understand an utterance you have to understand something of the local situation from which the speaker came" (p.61).

Heath described the working-class African American (Trackton) children's game-like reading practices using various texts, such as traffic signs and business marquees, brand names on appliances, logos on their clothes and school supplies, and the brand names of their favorite foods. Trackton parents also read obituaries on the front porch for the power they have to generate connectivity – "for some trace of acquaintance with either the deceased, his relatives, place of birth, church, or school" (p.196). In the European American working-class community (Roadville), reading was "enthusiastically endorsed" (p.219), but scarcely practiced. Roadville mothers bought their children books and occasionally read to them, encouraging them to interact with the text and answer questions. Throughout the book, Heath positioned literacy within each community, pointing out how texts, contexts, and people come together to create and inform meaning. This work raises important questions about the relationship between literacy practices and social contexts.

In their extensive ethnographic work with the Vai in Liberia Scribner and Cole (1981) identified three distinct literacies that were associated with particular uses. Arabic literacy was used for religious purposes such as reading, writing, and memorizing the Qur'an; English literacy was the official state literacy which dominated Western-styled schools; Vai literacy was used for

personal correspondence, record keeping, and commercial transactions. The authors found that literacy learning and use were contextual. When they tried to parse out the cognitive effects of each type of literacy, they found that only English literacy influenced cognitive functions, but this was limited to “expository talk in contrived situations” (p.244). In the end, Scribner and Cole’s research suggests that social literate practices matter more to individuals and local communities than decontextualized reading or writing.

In more recent work, researchers have taken up this social approach to literacy by studying youths’ local literate practices (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, and Waff, 1998, 2006). Some, for example, have studied the literacies of taggers (Aguilar, 2000; MacGillivray and Curwen, 2007; Miller, 2002). This body of literature focuses on the social purposes and practices of tagging as a local literacy practice, often among poor, minority, and urban youth. Through observations and interviews MacGillivray and Curwen (2007), for example, identified the socially-oriented purposes for tagging, arguing that tagging (a) maintains social relationships, (b) offers a means of developing a reputation, or “being known,” and (c) provides commentary on social issues such as national-level policy decisions and environmental issues.

In another study of youth literate practices, Moje (2000) spent three years with gang-affiliated youth in Salt Lake City, Utah. Through interviews, observations, and the collection of artifacts Moje explored the unendorsed literacy practices of these marginalized youth. The author found that through their poetry, tagging, dress, and bodies these gansta youth enacted sophisticated literacy practices that allowed them to “take hold’ of their lives” (p.662), express their fears and frustrations, and create and position themselves in specific ways. However, these young people did not actively engage in school literacies because they did not find these practices meaningful to their lives. Moje’s work highlights the sophistication of gang-affiliated youths’ literacies and raises questions about the literacies of other youth populations. What, for

example, are other youths' literate practices? How do other youth develop these literacies? And, how do these literacies function in these youths' everyday lives?

Finders' (1996, 1997) work addresses these questions. In a year-long ethnographic study of adolescent female literacy the author focused attention on one group – the social queens – and their self-selected teen zines (pronounced *zeens*).⁴ As a look into what adolescents were reading, Finders' work captures these girls' reading preferences with attention not only to what they read, but how they read, why they read, and with whom. Literacy, for these girls, was a social activity that influenced them individually and collectively. Their discussions about teen magazines mingled fluently with conversation about other aspects of adolescent life. In sum, Finders's work demonstrates how research from a sociocultural perspective may attend to what and how adolescents develop and use literacy in their everyday lives.

Neilsen (1998, 2006), for example, identified the role of “touchstone texts” in young peoples' lives. The author conceptualized touchstone texts as print, film, or cultural practices that “shape and reshape our identities” (2006, p.6). In these studies Nielsen explored how the film *Pulp Fiction* and the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* influenced the lives of two Canadian youth as high school students (1998) and eight years later when they were in their mid-20s (2006). The researcher demonstrated the profound impact that cultural texts can have on young peoples' sense of themselves. She stated that certain (cultural) texts can “inhabit the reader and the reader, in turn, writes the texts into his or her life” (2006, p.5).

Skinner (2007) studied how nine adolescent girls drew upon popular culture texts as mentors for writing. Using constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and discourse analysis (Gee, 1999), the researcher demonstrated how the focal student, Latoya,

⁴ Zines are a form of independent – mostly print – media that are often self-published and have a limited circulation. Most creators of zines (zinesters) sell their zines for the cost of printing and postage. The word *zine* comes from *fanzine*, which refers to the self-published work created by fans of comic books or science fiction literature (Wertham, 1973). Zines often give voice to issues or perspectives on issues not addressed in more mainstream media outlets.

drew upon cultural texts to create characters in an after-school writing club. Latoya drew upon cultural texts that characterized young girls as “good girls” and “bad girls.” She also drew upon popular television shows for how her characters should speak and act “along the good girl/bad girl continuum” (p.354). Skinner’s work highlights the relationship among the individual, texts, and society, drawing particular attention to the development of literacy skills through the influence of social contexts.

Working with three self-proclaimed, activist female producers of zines, Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) studied the girls and the content of their zine, *Burnt Beauty*. Over two years of observations, interviews, and the collection of artifacts the researchers explored how these girls were able to write “against gender, race, and class stereotypes” (p.409), and how they developed and used literacy to demonstrate their identities. Using a constant comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and key linkages (Erickson, 1986), the researchers drew attention to the development, sophistication, humor, purposefulness, and wit of the girls’ zines. They also argued that these girls’ literate practices were influenced by one another, their interest in activist causes, and punk rock music. Moreover, these girls were supported and rewarded for their literacy efforts via interpersonal relationships among the girls themselves and their peers, parents, and teachers. This work draws attention to the importance of literacy as social practice in youths’ lives, and contributes to literacy studies by enlarging the circle of young people selected for studying youth literacies.

This body of literature indicates that youth are literate, in a variety of ways, and that they read, write, act, and think in ways that are closely tied to membership in a variety of groups, and in a variety of spaces. These various explorations of young peoples’ literate practices in social contexts also suggests that literacy may afford them a voice and a place in their worlds, help them make and communicate meaning, and provide them with tools for

transforming their lives. Collectively, these literate practices hint at the wealth of literacies that researchers are beginning to address in young peoples' lives. One area of literacy research that is beginning to receive more scholarly attention is youths' religious literacies. To date, however, literacy researchers have yet to fully explore the literate practices and motivations for literacy of religious youth.

Religious Literacies

Religious youth are a major population in the United States and their literate practices are an important part of their daily experiences in the world. Eighty-five percent of American youth self-affiliate with a specific religious denomination (Smith and Denton, 2005; Smith et al., 2002). Half state that faith is "extremely" or "very" important in their lives (Smith and Denton, 2005). This is manifest through regular participation in religious services, activities, and groups, and engagement in religious practices, including religiously literate practices to which they are often deeply committed. In this section I review the literature on religious literacies, arguing that this work has produced valuable insights into the nature, function, and importance of religious literacies in the lives of youth, and that these insights warrant more attention to the motivations that drive these significant and powerful literate practices.

To paint a broad picture of American youths' religiously literate practices, I draw from The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a recent nationally representative study of the religious lives of American youth (Smith and Denton, 2005) which reported on findings from 3,370 telephone surveys and 267 personal interviews with English and Spanish-speaking youth across the country. This study noted that religious youth taught religious classes (20 percent), listened to religious radio programs or music by religious groups (51 percent), participated in a scripture study or prayer group (27 percent), read religious books other than the scriptures (30 percent), publically spoke about their religious beliefs (30 percent), and shared their religious

beliefs with others not of their faith (43 percent). Perhaps one of the central practices in religious life is prayer (Allport, 1937/1965, 1950; James, 1902/1958). The NSYR found that youth prayed alone and with their parents at very high rates. Fifty-three percent prayed a few times per week to many times per day. Forty-one percent prayed daily with one or both parents other than at meal times or as part of religious services. American youth also talked about religion with their families. Thirty-four percent talked in their families about God, scriptures, prayer or other religious issues at least a few times each week. This is as high as 74 percent for youth belonging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Smith and Denton, 2005). The NSYR, although providing a broad view of some of the literate practices of religious youth, was not designed to identify or explore these practices in detail. For that, one must turn to the field of literacy.

In Heath's (1983) extended ethnographic work discussed previously, she identified some of the religious literacies in each community. For the parents and grandparents of the European American mill worker community of Roadville, the Bible and religious instruction were the benchmarks for their actions as parents. If the particular precepts that they followed about good parenting were in the Bible, then they believed that they were good parents; they were said to have acted "right." Biblical instruction about raising children was even the focus of Sunday evening meetings for married couples.

In the black community of Trackton Heath noted the importance of oral storytelling, and the influence that the Bible had on it. She said, "Few written sources, other than the Bible, seem to influence either the content or the structure of oral stories in Trackton" (p.155). Reading the Bible, in fact, was one of few accepted solitary reading activities in Trackton. Much of the literate life in this community was social, especially in the "country churches." The print texts brought home from church were among the limited number of child-oriented texts Trackton

residents had in their homes. Clearly, Heath's work suggests the centrality of religion and religious practices, texts, and contexts in the lives of these individuals, and their communities.

In a review of the literature on religious language Keane (1997) reminds us of the interaction between speech and practice, observing that "religious practices alter any of a variety of formal and pragmatic features of everyday language" (p.47). Practices and speech, then, can interact through religion. Keane's work draws attention to the influence of religion on the way things get said, and for what purpose some religious practices like prayer can be undertaken. Others have also explored the use of language and literacy in religious contexts and its influence on children (Tusting, 2000; Zinsser, 1986).

Zinsser (1986), for example, studied "Bible literacy" in Northeastern fundamental Sunday schools, exploring ethnographically what religious literacy instruction looked like and how it influenced children. The author studied two Christian churches, focusing on classes of four- and five-year-olds. She argued that through listening, memorizing, and singing children learned the systematic classroom discourse of religion and religious literacy, the differences between sacred and secular texts, and the authority of sacred texts. These children, the author noted, "were learning a great deal about literacy" (p.56). They were, for example, surrounded by print messages in handouts, the walls, and the Bible, memorized and recited biblical stories, and sometimes opened their Bibles as if they were going to read them. Although limited by the brevity of her observations (9-11 weeks across two classes), Zinsser's study suggests something of the influence that religious texts, contexts, and pedagogies can have on children's literacy learning.

In a more recent study, Poveda, Cano, and Palomares-Valera (2005) studied the discourses of 30 Gitano children (aged five to 13) who participated in an after school computer program and in religious instruction classes located in a small city in Spain. The authors worked

with these youth in the computer class for a year and in the religious classes for 4-5 months. The authors of this study identified and discussed connections between Gitano children's oral discourses developed in religious classes and written discourses developed in a non-religious, after-school computer class. They found that the patterns of religious speech used in religious classes/services transferred into students' self-selected writing in the after-school program. Although these religious verbal practices transferred across Gitano culture, they did not transfer equally well into non-Gitano, or mainstream Spanish, culture. One of the key findings of this study is the centrality of religious literacies in Gitano culture, which influenced non-religious discourse. Indeed, for Gitano youth religious oral and written conventions took precedence over the non-religious. This study draws attention to the importance of the religious spaces in which youth acquire literacy skills and practices, and the influence that these practices can have on their learning in the form of acquiring and using different representations of talk and texts. This study also raises important questions about the centrality of religious literacies for religious youth, and the relationship between these literacies and non-religious literacies in secular, public schools.

In a study of children's religious classes, Baquedano-López (2000) explored the representations and use of the religious/cultural narrative of *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* in a Catholic parish in Los Angeles, California. The Catechism, or *doctrina*, classes were attended by recent Mexican immigrant children aged six to ten. Linguistically and interactionally the *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* narrative constructed young peoples' Mexican identity. The author found that teachers created narrative activities that encouraged students to develop and display a collective version of the narrative. She also observed that the presentation of this narrative created connections among the past, present, and future, transforming "an oppressed Mexican identity into an agentive one" (p.449). This study demonstrates religious cultural practices

around a key narrative, and shows the strength of religiously situated ways of constructing meaning of one's self and one's community. It also raises questions about the socializing function of religious narratives and their role in youths' identity formation, which suggests a relationship between religious literacies and identity.

Framing her work with six Yemeni American young women as "in-betweenness" Sarroub (2002) discussed how these youth negotiated their places in and out of school through their use of religious and secular texts. As a heuristic for studying literacy, in-betweenness represents the "adaptation of one's . . . identity to one's textual, social, cultural, and physical surrounding" (p.131). As part of her 26-month ethnographic field work, Sarroub interviewed and observed teachers and the six *hijabat* (Arabic girls who wear the head scarf). In terms of literate practice, the *hijabat* organized their overall behaviors and speech into categories derived from the *Qur'an*: *haram*, which means forbidden; *halal*, which means lawful; and *mahkru*, which means condemned by the Prophet Muhammad, but not explicitly identified as such in *Qur'an*. For these young women, religion and religious texts played a central role in their daily activities and speech. Religious literacies were a profound and important means of making sense of the experiences in their lives in and out of school. By living their lives in accordance with their religious traditions, literacy – specifically, religious literacy – "endowed a state of spiritual grace upon the girls" (p.145). This study demonstrates the prominent position religion plays in how certain religious youth make sense of their experiences, through their religious beliefs and practices. It also suggests the importance of knowing the texts that youth use to make sense of their experiences in the world, as well as the importance of religious literacies in youths' lives, and the importance of knowing how various types of literacies are represented by various types of youth.

Although she is much older than the target population of this dissertation, Doña C (Farr, 2000) and Doña Josefina (Guerra and Farr, 2002) reveal some important manifestations and functions of religious literacy.⁵ Through extensive ethnographic work in a predominantly Mexican section of Chicago, Illinois, Farr and Guerra studied the literate practices that took place in religious contexts. For Doña C/Josefina (a Catholic) religious writing augmented her social power. It enabled her to deal with personal and family problems, such as her diabetes, her husband's drinking problem, and the pressures her son was under from local gangs. As she wrote letters to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit she developed the ability to handle stressful events in her life. Her language in these letters was "rich, persuasive, and confident" (Guerra and Farr, 2002, p.108). Religious reading was also empowering for Doña C/Josefina because it allowed her "resist and often transcend very oppressive situations" (Farr, 2000, p. 319). This work demonstrates how religious literacies may be manifest in one's life as forces that can empower one to act in assertive ways that enable one to take control of one's experiences. This is not surprising for adults who have greater social autonomy, but what about youth? Can religion and religious literacies similarly empower youth to assert control of their lives, even in potentially oppressive situations?

Akom's (2003) two-year ethnographic study of Nation of Islam⁶ (NOI) youth in a West Philadelphia urban high school suggests that they can. This work demonstrates how religious students can resist educative and societal practices that conflict with religious practices and beliefs while simultaneously drawing on their religious culture to achieve academic and social success. One 11th grade, female student, for example, said that her membership in NOI increased her commitment to college attendance and raising a family; improved her attitude

⁵ Textual evidence suggests that Doña C and Doña Josephina refer to the same woman. Farr and Guerra study her for different projects, using different pseudonyms.

⁶ The Nation of Islam is a black American Muslim religion established in response to the Jim Crow laws of the mid-twentieth century. It is structured upon a culture of opposition to the prevailing white ruling class's ideologies and historical (and current) subjugation of blacks.

toward education; influenced the development of her identity as a black queen; increased her commitment to her religion; and gave her the power to accomplish her goals. It is important that she attributed these changes to her religion because it represents for her a clear and powerful way that she made sense of her education, and herself. Another student discussed how her involvement in the NOI literally taught her how to be smart. She said that a sister in the NOI taught her to “write out questions . . . just so I can really figure out if what there [sic] saying is true” (p.312). This is particularly interesting in thinking about how religious students come to make meaning because it suggests, among other things, a concern for a notion of truth that lies apart from or beyond the text. This young woman did not simply want to understand *what* she read; rather, her aim was to evaluate the information according to a notion of truth consistent with the NOI ideology. This is deep, sophisticated literacy mediated by her religious commitment and training.

Summary and Conclusion

The religious literacies of the youth in the previous studies can be rich, vibrant, important, and powerful (and empowering). These literacies help youth navigate their life experiences, find a place in the world, develop and represent identities, resist oppression, and succeed educationally. The body of work in religious literacies also offers views of the gaps in our knowledge of youths’ religious literacies. For example, what is the role of religious texts in youths’ lives? Very few studies address this directly. Nor do they explore the relationship between texts and motivation for religious literacy, which is surprising given the prominence of religious texts in such major religious traditions as Christianity, Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism. Also, what role do religious contexts play? As with texts, how religious contexts influence these youths’ motivation for literacy is not often addressed in the existing literature. And finally, what is it that motivates these youth to engage in such rich, powerful religious literate practices?

None of the existing studies address this crucial question. Given the value of religious literacies in the lives of so many youth, it behooves literacy educators to begin to address these questions. This dissertation is a step in that direction.

In the next chapter I explain the methods I used to address these important questions in this study. I describe the participants, the data generation and analysis methods, and the steps I took to enhance the study's credibility.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology, Design, and Procedures

The central purpose of this study is to understand what motivates Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth to develop and use literate practices as part of their religious identities. I operationalize this with the following guiding questions:

1. What are these youths' religious literate practices?
2. How do contexts influence motivation for literacy?
3. What motivations can be drawn from texts?
4. What motivations for literacy do the youth bring?

Consistent with the theoretical orientation of this study, the research methodology, design, and procedures seek to understand what motivates religious youth for literacy. From a social literary theory perspective, literacy is best understood in the immediate context in which it is developed and practiced (Gee, 2000a; Street, 2004), for as Street (2004) states "literacy is always instantiated, its potential realized, through local practices" (p.326). One must, therefore, be in the context in which the literacy practices are occurring in order to understand them. Gee (2000b) refers to such research as the study of literacy "on the ground" (p.126). I designed the research approach for this study so that I could enter and explore the worlds of religious youth to understand what motivates them for literacy, from their perspectives.

The data generation methods in this study are interviews, observations, and artifacts (Patton, 2002). These techniques are consistent with the purpose of the study, which involves discovering, documenting, and describing what motivates these youth for religious literacy

practices. This twelve-month study is exploratory in nature, thus lending itself to qualitative data generation methods because these methods may be used to “explore substantive areas about which little is known” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This section describes the participants of the study, the data generation methods, and the methods I used to analyze the data. It also discusses steps I took to enhance the credibility of the study and reduce researcher bias.

Participants

Purposive sampling is a method for selecting only those cases that most clearly and profitably inform the study. Patton (2002, p.46) calls this a process of selecting “information-rich cases.” One may use any of several purposive sampling techniques. The one I use here is a homogeneous cases sampling method (Kemper, Stringfield, Teddlie, 2003). The goal of this sampling technique is to gather data from those who are similar in important ways related to the study. Since religion is central to this study, this sampling method provided for a focus on a particular religious subgroup of religious youth to study in detail. I focused on youth from two religions rather than sampling from a wide variety of religions because I aimed to gain insight into what motivated specific bodies of religiously-similar youth to learn and enact religious literate practices. Sampling from two religious populations of youth allowed me to compare across the religions. Although I expected variations among the youth in terms of their religious literacies and motivations, selecting youth from two religious traditions provided clear lenses for seeing similarities and differences in terms of the religion (and the religious culture) itself.

Given that youth who belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are generally considered the most religious by measures of religion such as church attendance, youth group participation, the importance of faith in their daily lives, and adherence to traditional biblical beliefs (Smith and Denton, 2005) I purposively selected nine of these youth from a Midwestern Latter-day Saint congregation situated in city with a major public university. I

also purposively selected seven youth from a Midwestern First United Methodist Church in the same city because these youth are typically well-represented on measures of religiosity (Smith and Denton, 2005; Schwadel and Smith, 2005). From these two congregations I selected youth who regularly attended religious services because worship service attendance is a strong indicator of youth religiosity (Wallace and Forman, 1998). I also obtained a roughly even distribution of males and females because males and females often differ in the kinds of religious practices that are more meaningful for them, and in their levels of religious commitment (Smith and Denton, 2005). In total, I consented 16 youth from both denominations. In this study, I also include representations of group activity, taking care not to include talk or specific actions on the part of non-consented participants.

To recruit the Latter-day Saint youth I sent email messages to all of the 12-18 year old youth (and their parents) who regularly attended religious worship services, based on my observations. I informed the youth and parents about the study and invited the youth to participate. I also encouraged the parents and youth to contact me with any questions or clarifications. All of the youth I contacted attended the congregation in which I was a practicing member. Nine of the 18 youth agreed to participate. For the Methodist youth, I obtained permission to make a public presentation at the Sunday worship services to recruit interested youth. After several attempts to make my presentation were frustrated due to time constraints or instructor oversights, I began, with permission, approaching groups of youth as they talked with each other (and adults) before and after worship services. In these small groups I informed the youth about the study and solicited their involvement. I talked with the youth until I reached a roughly even distribution of male and female participants, and a roughly equal number of Methodist and Latter-day Saint youth participants. I did not select youth based on

their claims of religiosity; rather, I invited youth to participate who I observed were actively attending religious worship services.

My familiarity with the Latter-day Saint youth and their parents may have influenced who agreed to participate. Some of the youth and parents may have felt obligated to participate because of our shared religious commitments or personal associations. Moreover, as many of the youths' parents were graduate students, professionals with advanced degrees, or professors at the local university, they may have been influenced by their association with the university or their professional training to encourage their children to participate in research. The same may be said of the Methodist youth who participated.

Data Generation

One of the researcher's tasks is to provide participants with a means for representing their experiences in the world (Patton, 2002). Careful attention to data generating techniques can provide participants with the framework they need to express their experiences, in accordance with the study's purpose(s). Qualitative data are most often produced from three kinds of data generation: interviews, observations, and documents (Patton, 2002). I briefly discuss each of these below, how I used them in this study, and how my role as researcher may have influenced them.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allow for youth to express *their* conceptions of things, and allow the researcher to probe responses about youths' experiences, perceptions, and knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. On one end of the spectrum interviews can be highly scripted, allowing very little room for follow-up questions. These most nearly resemble surveys. On the other end, they can be exceedingly open-ended, offering the participants little direction in their responses. I aimed for a place in between these ends by designing and

administering semi-structured interviews that guided participant responses with specific questions and follow-up questions, but allowed participants to answer in ways that reflected their conceptions and experiences. Semi-structured interviews also allowed me to probe interesting and relevant responses as they occurred.

The participants completed three formal semi-structured interviews distributed over the course of the year-long study. The first interview (Appendix A) was designed to gather important background details about their notions of religion, their religious and literate involvement, information about school and religious activities, and their religious and academic goals. Sixteen youth completed this interview (seven Methodist youth, nine Latter-day Saint youth). The purpose of the second interview (Appendix B) was to understand their motivations for school and religious literacies. Fourteen youth completed this interview (six Methodist youth, seven Latter-day Saint youth). The third interview (Appendix C) was designed to understand the motivations for discussion in religious contexts and the participants' conceptions of the sacred. Eleven youth completed the third interview (five Methodist youth, six Latter-day Saint youth). Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. I audio recorded them and transcribed them prior to analysis. The religious leaders of the Latter-day Saint and Methodist congregations reviewed the interview protocols, scrutinizing their appropriateness and sensitivity for the youth of their respective congregations.

My identification with Christianity in general and Mormonism in particular may have influenced youths' interview responses. Insofar as the Methodist youth knew that I was a Christian they may have felt that they were speaking to one who not only knew about Christianity, but believed and practiced it. This may have encouraged them to speak more freely about their beliefs, practices, and experiences because they were speaking to a fellow "believer" who they may have interpreted as one who appreciated their beliefs and practices. This same

identification as a Christian may have also led some of the youth to limit their responses because they may have assumed that I knew what they were talking about; that we shared a common Christian cultural perspective that required little by way of explanation. The same may be said of the Latter-day Saint youth. Often I had to ask them to explain what they meant by such terms as Young Women, Young Men, priesthood, mutual activities, personal progress, duty to God award, and so forth because they used these terms in a familiar way with me. Although I had my own perspective on such terms, it was important for this study to understand how *the youth* were using them. Moreover, some of the Latter-day Saint youth may have limited their responses because they knew that I regularly talked with their parents and they may not have wanted some of their responses to get back to their parents. In retrospect, I realize that I too often assumed that the youth believed what they told me, or that I believed them myself. I could have asked more questions to more accurately gauge Methodist and Latter-day Saint youths' commitments during the interviews.

Participant Observations

Participant observation is characterized by extended contact with participants in places they normally occupy and in situations they normally find themselves (Bogdan, 1973; Levine, Gallimore, Weisner, and Turner, 1980). In participant observation research, the researcher is involved in the daily life of those with whom he works. He talks with them and shares their interests, concerns, and experiences. The researcher's goal is to understand the unique character of the community he studies and his participants' experiences in the world – as they relate to the study – in the way that the participants understand those experiences. In this way the researcher develops a more holistic understanding of the complex social relationships that exist in the lives of the participants.

My role was not strictly that of an observer, or of a participant (Gold, 1958). As an *absolute observer* I would be completely outside of the youths' worlds and activities. I would be a recorder of information only. This relationship may be compared to two parties on opposite sides of a one-way mirror (Davis, 1986). There is exceedingly limited interaction between the two. The researcher, from this perspective, is alien (Bositis, 1988). As an *absolute participant* I would be a full member of the participants' worlds. I would seek to interact with them in as natural a way as possible, concealing my true identity, affiliations, and purposes from the participants and the larger community in order to gain access to the participants and obtain their trust in order to conduct the study. The researcher, from this perspective, would be invisible (Bositis, 1988). I aimed for a place in between the absolute observer and absolute participant perspectives where I spent various amounts of time inside and outside the youths' worlds – observing *and* participating in their social (and religious) activities.

I observed the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youths' involvement in religious activities such as attending formal worship services, religious study groups, and religious (and religiously sponsored) social events. I observed these youth in their natural environments at selected times for approximately 9 months, which followed both congregations' instructional schedules. The key religious contexts for this study were Latter-day Saint early-morning seminary, Methodist Youth Fellowship, and regularly scheduled Sunday worship services for both congregations (see Chapter Four for details). The Latter-day Saint early-morning seminary ran from 6:20-7:15 AM each day that school was in session. One teacher instructed approximately thirteen youth. Latter-day Saint Sunday worship services lasted three hours, all of which I did not observe. Methodist Youth Fellowship (referred to by Methodists as MYF) was held each Sunday evening of the school year. It ran two hours and was designed to be socially engaging and religiously

educative. The Methodist Sunday morning youth service ran from 9:20-10:30 AM. It was called Sol Cafe.

In terms of my actual observations, they took various forms as requested (or allowed) by the denominational leaders. The Latter-day Saint teachers, for example, asked that I limit my role primarily to that of an observer in seminary and Sunday, small group instruction. I, therefore, primarily observed youth, participating only when invited by the teachers. My participation included answering questions directed at me, talking with the teachers informally before and after class, and talking with the students informally before and after class. During these informal discussions the students I talked about their part-time jobs, extracurricular activities and interests, and their families. When I saw these youth at Sunday worship services we also talked about similar things. The youth referred to me, as is common in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as Brother Rackley. I referred to them by their first names. The teachers and I talked informally about our families and how seminary was going (including conversations about individual youth). After class we also talked about aspects of the lesson that we found particularly interesting.

My relationship with the Latter-day Saint youth and adults in this study could have influenced observations and interview responses. Youth, for example, may have been less willing to do or say something that they did not want me, a member of their congregation, to hear or see, or that they thought might get back to their parents. With the adults, our close relationship may have influenced how and what they chose to share with me as part of our informal discussions as well as what they did or said during religious instruction. However, my relationship with the Latter-day Saint youth and adults and my intimate knowledge and experience with Latter-day Saint beliefs, practices, and values may have also provided insight not available to others less familiar with Mormonism, in general, and these youth in particular.

The Methodist leadership allowed me to be as involved with the youth and the instruction as I felt appropriate. For these observations I played a more participatory role than I did with the Latter-day Saint youth. I participated in small group and large group discussions by asking and answering questions. I also led youths' small group discussions on occasion when another adult facilitator was required. I was even invited by some of the Methodist adults to organize and deliver instruction for MYF. Although I agreed to do so, I was never actually given the opportunity. Primarily before and after my participant observations I engaged in conversations with Methodist youth. As with the Latter-day Saint youth, we talked about school, their extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, and family. My religion and my personal commitments did not come up in these conversations, but they did in some of the semi-structured interviews when the youth asked me about them. On one occasion Daniel asked me if I read the Bible. When I told him that I did he explained that he wanted to read the Bible over the summer, but knew that some parts would be more important to him than other parts. He asked me if I would create a Bible reading schedule for him. I did so.

The Methodist youth in this study referred to me mostly by my first name. They called the adults in their congregation by their first name. Some youth preferred to call me Mr. Rackley. I called them by their first names. During my observations the Methodist adults and I also engaged in informal conversation. Initially we talked mostly about my research, but over the course of the study we talked about our families, the youth attending the worship services, and the history of the Methodist church in Greenview City. Youth and adults did not appear to be concerned that I was not a Methodist. I felt that the adults helped me learn about their religion because I was an outsider, not because I was a *Latter-day Saint* outsider. My religious beliefs and practices rarely came up in conversations. On one occasion I was asked during an evening worship service about my experiences attending Brigham Young University, particularly

in relationship to the University Honor Code (Methodist, January 18, 2009). The youth did not appear to know my religious affiliation until they asked me during the interviews. I did not notice differences in the Methodist youths' responses after I told them I was a practicing Latter-day Saint.

As a participant and observer, I was guided by what was going on during the observations – what Heath and Street (2008) call the “fundamental challenge to ethnographers” (p.35) – and how it influenced these youths' motivations for literacy. I attended to individuals, contexts, and activities, exploring who the participants were, how they interacted, where they were, what they were doing, how they were doing it, and to what effect (Appendix D). I focused on occasions when reading, writing, and speaking were integral to the participants' meaning making, and tried to identify what appeared to motivate these practices. I also focused on participants' social practices and ways of thinking about reading and writing (Gee, 1996) as they relate to religious practices. Street (1984) called these ways of doing and thinking about literacy, literacy practices (Chapter One).

Narrative descriptions, in the form of field notes, drawn from direct observations, informal conversations, and personal experiences provided the primary data of participant observations. In these participant observation situations, I took detailed, descriptive field notes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995), where appropriate, about what individuals said and did during “distinct moments in group life” (p.112). I noted the appearance of individuals and places, individuals' gestures and expressions, and informal conversations between participants and participants and me (Bogdan, 1973). I paid particular attention to what, how, and for what purposes these youth used and enacted religious talk, symbols, and practices. I also attended to the effect of the youths' religious talk, symbols, and practices. In all of this, participants'

meaning of events and practices received special attention (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995; Patton, 2002).

Participant observations made a crucial contribution to this study. They provided another form of evidence and means to assess these youths' motivations for religious literacies. Participant observations also helped verify and challenge statements made during the interviews. Together with interviews, participant observations offered a layering of methodological approaches for understanding what motivates these youth for literacy.

Artifacts

Artifacts refer to a variety of secondary data that are residual, or left over from another purpose or another place that may be used to inform a current – and more often, different – purpose or study. Secondary data include personal documents, official documents, and physical data (Johnson and Turner, 2003). Personal documents include those artifacts that are recorded for private purposes such as personal letters and drawings, photographs, and audio/video recordings. Official documents are those artifacts recorded or created for institutional purposes. These include television/radio/web broadcasts, speeches, student records, and books. Physical data are those artifacts that represent “physical traces left by people” (Johnson and Turner, 2003, p.15), such as notes or other markings in a variety of personal and official documents or objects. As appropriate, I collected artifacts in each of these categories of secondary data as they related to the religious literacies, practices, and motivations that I observed. I collected them only from consented youth, teachers, family members, and religious leaders.

Together, interviews, observations, and artifacts developed a portrait of these youths' religious literacies. The three sources of data worked together to verify and challenge findings by offering multiple views of the way these youth used and developed religious literacies and their motivations for these literacies.

Analyzing the Data

From one perspective, the first principle of qualitative data analysis is to “capture participants ‘in their own terms’ [and] learn *their* categories” (Lofland, 1971, cited in Patton, 2002; see Strauss, 1987). To do this I analyzed the interview transcripts, observation notes, and artifacts through a constant comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The constant comparative method is a qualitative approach to data analysis conducted for “discovering concepts and relationships in raw data and then organizing these into a theoretical explanatory scheme” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.11). To do this, the constant comparative method leads the researcher to generate categories with their associated properties and dimensions, as they relate to the project. Comparing one event or object to another, or comparing one abstract category to another, the researcher builds up categories that consist of indicators of a specific class of objects or events. In the process, the researcher confronts and makes decisions about the similarities, differences, and levels of consistency among the indicators. If done well, these decisions lead to cohesion and variation among the categories. The researcher also generates important properties and dimensions of the categories he has identified and how they relate to one another, which provide richer and more precise theoretical explanations of the phenomenon under study. It is important to note that these categories are drawn from the data; they are not determined by the literature or brought into the project by the researcher himself (Charmaz, 2000).

The development of theory – the aim of the constant comparative method – is drawn from the data through careful analysis, which consists of identifying and refining categories and their relationships through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, which are all part of a single coding process. The constant comparisons discussed above are a fundamental practice throughout the coding process. Open coding involves “opening up” inquiry into the data to

explore what they contain. It is “unrestricted coding” insofar as every category, property, and dimension is provisional, at least early on (Strauss, 1987, p.28). The central purpose of open coding is *generating* categories from the data, with their accompanying properties and dimensions. These categories must be conceptual, not merely descriptive. That is, they must be abstract and able to represent a class of events, not just the events themselves. Getting categories to the conceptual level is done by careful and repeated reviews of the data – interview transcripts, observation notes, and artifacts, for example – and breaking them into distinct parts that are then closely examined through comparative analysis for similarities and differences. Through the open coding process, events or objects that have common characteristics are organized into the same conceptual categories. Dissimilar events or objects are separated into different categories. One generative approach to coding is microanalysis, or careful line-by-line analysis of the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This can be done word by word, or document by document, but its purpose is to open up the range of possibilities in the data so that the researcher can begin to identify categories and their accompanying properties and dimensions. I conducted microanalysis in this study. Here is an example from an interview with Kate [categories are in brackets]:

ER: Why do you participate in the religious activities you’ve talked about? Things like Sunday school, MYF, and scripture reading?

Kate: It helps me learn about God [learn about God]. Because you learn about the Bible and it helps you learn through the Bible [learn about Bible]. How things, how people say things about Jesus kind of applies to the Bible. It is where they get that from [Bible as resource]. It’s always that background knowledge you get with that [knowledge from Bible]. Youth Group. I love being with my friends there [religious peers]. And just to be in that church. To be in that kind of

community is knowing that you have that always to lean back on [support from religious community]. It's just a really unique environment [special place]. I think it is important to have a place like that where you could really be yourself and not worry so much about what other people are thinking of you [importance of religious context; be yourself; no judgment]. You're accepted [acceptance]. And I'm in Strangely Warmed Players, the drama troupe [activities through church].

ER: Oh, yeah?

Kate: Yeah, and that's kind of cool. It's kind of—it is kind of proclaiming the gospel and in just a different way [proclaim gospel]. And it's been a lot of fun and it has helped me to be more comfortable, be more secure [comfort/security].

Axial coding puts together the data “cracked open” during open coding in an attempt to “form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena” under study (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.124). By reassembling the data researchers find where predetermined categories intersect with one another, which allows them to systematically “build up a dense texture of relationships around the ‘axis’ of the category” (Strauss, 1987, p.64), one category at a time. Developing these relationships is the primary aim of axial coding. When engaging in axial coding the researcher looks for answers to questions such as why, where, when, how, and with what affect (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The answers to these questions help to identify more clearly and precisely how a particular category is manifest in the data. One method of axial coding involves making relational statements that link existing concepts together (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). I used relational statements as an analytic tool in this study to help clarify the relationships among the codes. For example, I constructed the following relational statements, using previously identified concepts (concepts are in quotations marks): As a consequence of

feeling “free to speak” and “free to act” in the company of “religious peers,” the youth felt “safe/secure” and “accepted” in religious contexts which may have helped them engage in “religious talk” and “religious reading.” Here is another example: Because “religious texts” were important to the youth and the youth often had a clear “purpose for reading” these texts, they often persisted when encountering “textual difficulties.” Constructing relational statements helped me identify how the extant concepts fit together to offer a more clear explanation of the youths’ literate practices and motivations for literacy.

Selective coding further refines and integrates categories and subcategories identified during open and axial coding. By the time the researcher is engaging in selective coding a number of the categories and sub-categories have been integrated so that the remaining codes are interconnected with one another. It is these codes that receive the researcher’s attention in selective coding. The purpose of selective coding is to identify and develop a central – or core – category that will provide a theoretical scheme that can explain what is happening in the data. The central category represents the primary theme of the research project. Strauss (1987) identifies the following criteria for determining if a category qualifies as a central category:

- Every other category relates to it.
- All or most cases have elements that point toward it.
- The data are not forced to make illogical or inconsistent explanations.
- It should be abstract/conceptual enough to be used to develop theory more generally.
- As it is integrated with more categories, it “grows in depth and explanatory power.”
- It is robust enough to explain contradictions in the data (p.36).

The central category, in a word, offers the best fit for addressing the aim of the research. One useful approach for identifying the central category is to write out the storyline

(Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Taking a step back from the minutia of the data, the researcher writes a few descriptive sentences about what going on in the data, broadly speaking. Once he identifies the heart of the research, he names it and begins to connect other concepts to it. At this point, the researcher writes the story again, this time using the existing categories drawn from the data to make connections among the concepts and identify their relationships to the central category. I used this method to analyze the data for each of the research questions. For example, I wrote out a story line in the following way to address the research question about youths' motivations for reading religious texts:

I'm struck by how important scripture is to all of the youth in this study. Some read it daily, others less often, but all of them talk about how important it is to them personally. Even those who read scripture less frequently say that they should read it more often. Some of them, like Joshua, Jennifer, and Samantha say they feel bad about not reading more. Why is that? What is so important about scripture for these youth that they read it, and if they don't they feel like they should? Scripture seems to be a critical part of each of their denominations. They talk about it a lot in church and refer to it often, although in different ways. Scripture is a resource for them. From it they learn lessons, morals, and principles for how to live and manage themselves in a complex world. Scripture gives them guidance, direction. It also brings them peace, solace. A lot of the youth talked about picking up the Bible or Book of Mormon explicitly to find relief from a difficult experience or just to calm down. But there's more to it than that. Scripture also seems to give them power to do the right thing. It's like a spiritual battery for a lot of the youth, particularly for the Latter-day Saint youth. For a lot of the Methodist youth, scripture is a resource for learning information. However, all of the

youth are trying to live what they learn from scripture. They seem to, at some level, revere it.

The constant comparative method calls for the researcher to continue to refine the theoretical scheme developed through the coding process by identifying and correcting inconsistencies, logical gaps, and poorly structured or articulated categories (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This is done by returning to and reviewing the data and the analytic tools one has used, such as memos, relational statements, and storylines. The researcher scrutinizes the existing categories, their properties and dimensions, and their relationships to one another, checking for levels of consistency and gaps in logical development. One is now making final decisions about the saliency of each category's properties and dimensions, the range of variability built into the theory, and the theory's explanatory power (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This process continues until the data are theoretically saturated, which means (a) there are no new properties or dimensions surfacing from the data, (b) the categories and the relationships among them are well-developed, and (c) additional data collection and analyses add little to the existing theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The final analytic phases continue through the final stages of writing.

The affordances and constraints provided by my identification and familiarity with Christianity and Mormonism may have shaped my interpretation of the data. In terms of constraints, I was in a position to read cultural values and beliefs into analyses of youths' statements, observational data, and artifacts. And I may have done so. I may have also, on occasion, failed to appropriately interrogate the data or accepted conclusions too readily because they appeared familiar to me. However, my knowledge and experiences with Christianity and Mormonism also afforded me important analytic insights. For example, as I analyzed interview and observational data in which the Latter-day Saint youth mentioned

prophets, I knew that the Church believes in ancient as well as modern prophets, so I took this into account in my analyses by following up with some of the youth and analyzing how what the youth stated related to the Church's teachings.

In summary, for this study, I generated core categories that relate to youths' religious literate practices and motivations for these practices. I collected and generated data, while simultaneously coding axially and selectively around the core categories that deal with these youths' religiously situated beliefs, values, and purposes and how they relate to their motivations for literacy. This inductive design for analyzing the data made space for participants' motivations for religious literacies to come to the fore, while also allowing me to note my developing interpretations and the emerging theories that illuminated what I observed. The idea was to create an iterative relationship between exploring and confirming, all the while discovering patterns and (inter)relationships among the data, and arriving finally at "a creative synthesis" (Patton, 2002, p.41) of the data.

Enhancing Credibility

In order to ensure rigor and reduce bias in this study, I employed a host of data generation methods and data analysis tools. As already mentioned, the purpose of this study is exploratory. I aimed to generate hypotheses about the nature and use of religious youths' religious literacies and the motivations that drove them. The data generation methods identified above, in addition to being relevant to the purpose of the study, also contributed to the rigor of the study. The religious leaders of the Latter-day Saint and Methodist congregations, for example, scrutinized the interviews, vetting their appropriateness and considerateness for the youth of their congregations. By including the religious leaders in the data generation process, I attended to the local environmental and, in this case, religious conditions that were best known

to those most intimately involved with them, thereby attending to some of the biases that I might have brought with me into the study.

Moreover, time and settings are important methodological elements of this study that enhance its rigor. Immersion into the youths' multiple religious environments, over time, provided an added level of credibility and the reduction of bias (Patton, 2002; Woods, 1992). These methodological approaches allowed me the time in the various contexts to verify and challenge perspectives that I had identified. They also allowed the youth to become accustomed to my presence, which may have made them more comfortable offering more and different kinds of information which deepened *and* broadened the data generated.

During this iterative data generation/analysis process, I employed two additional strategies for enhancing credibility: member checking and peer examination. Member checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) is the process of employing participants' views on the data, categories, codes, interpretations, and conclusions of the study. This approach allows the participants to see their lives and experiences in the research and gives them the opportunity to weigh in on the accuracy of the researcher's conceptions of various aspects of the study (and their lives). Member checking can reduce misrepresentation and researcher bias. I engaged in member checking by reading portions of others' interviews and asking for participants' responses to their peers' words. I also presented youth participants with drafts of analytic codes and interpretations of artifacts for their responses. I asked them if these codes and/or interpretations were representative of their experiences. On one occasion, for example, I informed the youth of my developing interpretation of their motivations for engaging in religious texts by stating that developing knowledge, applying what they learn, receiving strength and comfort, and developing personal connections with God were important motivations for literacy. Many of the youth responded by saying that these captured their

motivations. Some of the youth used this opportunity to share additional experiences that supported my interpretations. Other youth indicated that all of these motivations were not equally weighted for them. Joshua (Methodist), for example, said that he was mostly motivated to read scripture by what he could learn from it and how it helped him live his religious beliefs and values. I also presented participants with key findings and results. I asked the youth for their responses as they may relate to the accuracy of the representation of the experiences, as I understood them.

Similar to member checking, peer examination calls for others to offer their views as the study develops (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These others are the researcher's colleagues with interest and/or expertise as they relate to the study. Peer examination is one way of "keeping the researcher honest." It allows expert colleagues to generate questions at any point in the study that may inform any piece of the study. Colleagues can also identify negative cases or disconfirming evidence. They can offer hypotheses, propose the generation or elimination of codes, and identify lines of inquiry embedded within the data. Peer examination is limited by peers' expertise and the principal researcher's willingness to engage his colleagues' views. I used peer examination by seeking feedback on aspects of the study as it moved from proposal to final product. Through presentations and discussions at local and international professional organizations such as the Literacy Research Association, The American Educational Research Association, The University of Michigan Graduate Student Research Symposium, and The University of Michigan Sopranos Study Group I sought peer input to (a) develop codes from the data generated, (b) identify and follow potentially productive lines of inquiry, (c) develop working hypotheses that explained what I was observing through the data generation methods, and (d) identify implications of this work as it relates to literacy, motivation for literacy, and education.

Summary and Conclusion

I used a homogenous cases sampling methodology to select 9 Latter-day Saint and 8 Methodist youth to participate in this study. The purpose of the study was to explore *religious* youths' literacies and motivations for religious literacy I, therefore, selected Latter-day Saints and Methodists because they tend to be more rather than less religious (Smith and Denton, 2005). Through interviews, observations, and artifacts I generated data on their literate practices and the motivations behind them, and through a constant comparative approach (Strauss and Glaser, 1967) I analyzed the data by conducting open, axial, and selective coding. Furthermore, I sought to enhance the credibility of the findings by engaging in such practices as member checking and peer examination. The next chapter explores the contextual environment within which I conducted the study. It provides a view of the various embedded contextual layers and anticipates their influence on youths' literate practices and motivations, which I present in Chapters Five through Eight.

Chapter 4

The Cultural Contexts of Literacy and Motivation for Literacy

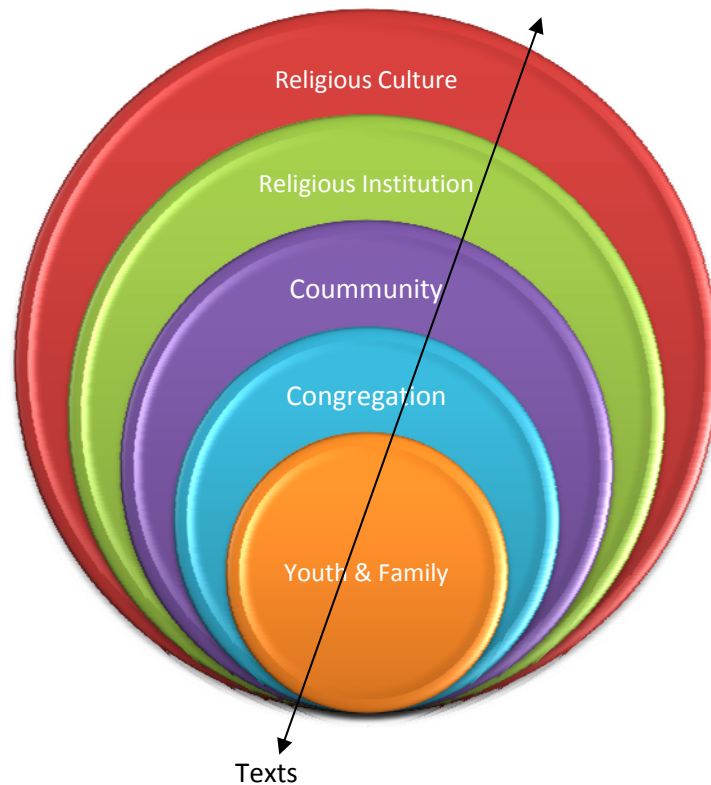
It is unlikely that any single context can account for or influence a lifetime of literate practices or motivations for literacy. Our lives, literate practices, and motivations are more complex than any one context. Therefore, to better understand the various contexts at work in this study and the nature of their relationship in influencing youths' literate practices and motivations I provide the following model (Figure 4.1). This model is informed by a sociocultural perspective that highlights the influence of social context, in this case, the embedded contexts for literacy. I draw from this model to show how the social and cultural contexts influence literacy and motivation for literacy. In this chapter I identify the salient aspects of each of the contexts so that the reader may better understand what these contexts look like, and therefore, how they might influence literacy and motivation for literacy.

Unpacking the Embedded Contexts of Literacy

This model includes the following contexts: youth and family, local congregation, civic community of Greenview City, religious institutions of Mormonism and Methodism, and the larger American religious culture into which all of the other contexts were embedded. Although the model presents the contexts as distinct from each other, in theory and practice they are porous and not as neatly organized. For example, Methodism and Mormonism are worldwide religions that are not entirely bound within American religious culture. However, I organize the graphic in this way to highlight the various environments that influence youths' literacy practices and the motivations for these practices. Texts, especially sacred texts such as the Bible,

and textual practices cut across each of these contexts. In the remainder of this chapter I unpack each context, identifying important aspects which may influence youths' literacy and motivation for literacy. I begin from outside, working in.

Figure 4.1: Conception of the Embedded Contexts of Literacy



American Religious Culture

The United States is awash in religious messages that permeate entertainment media (Clark, 2002; Winston, 2009), the speech of public figures (Mori, 2005; Obama, 2009; Prothero, 2007), and nearly every aspect of American life (Manseau and Sharlet, 2004; Moore, 2003), including literacy. It has been this way for centuries (Moore, 2003; Prothero, 2007). Moore (2003) stated that the Framers of the American Constitution wanted a religious nation, believing that "it was absolutely important to the success of the proposed democratic republic" (p.6). Today, religion remains an influential part of American life with 85 percent of youth claiming a religious tradition (Smith and Denton, 2005). Moreover, 65 percent of American adults agree

that the Bible “answers all or most of the basic questions of life.” Seventy-five percent indicate that they want to deepen their understanding of the Bible (Gallup and Simmons, 2000). As the debates about religion and American public life continue, one thing is certain: the “evidence of the public power of religion is overwhelming” (Prothero, 2007, p.6). Wexler (2002) observes:

A great many Americans rely on religious reasons when thinking and talking about public issues. Ninety percent of the members of Congress, by one report, consult their religious beliefs when voting on legislation. A majority of Americans believe that religious organizations should publicly express their views on political issues, and an even stronger majority believe it is important for a President to have strong religious beliefs (p.1161-2).

Wexler’s words are underscored by indications that Americans prefer leaders who are religious – Christian even – rather than non-religious or non-Christian: 92 percent of Americans said they would consider voting for a Jewish candidate for president, whereas only 49 percent said they would consider voting for an atheist (Steinfels, 2001). Simply put, in American public life “religion matters” (Prothero, 2007, p.7). American is a religious nation with a long, rich religious history and culture. In the United States religion has been and continues to be intertwined with politics (Kranish, 2006; Marsh, 2006; Mori, 2005; Newport, 2009; Obama, 2009; Sharlet, 2008), education (Banton-Smith 2002; Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2008; Kuh and Gonyea, 2006; Prothero, 2007; USDE, 2003), popular culture (Clark, 2002; Moore, 2003; Winston, 2009), and other spheres of public life. As Manseau and Sharlet (2004) put it, in America “the Bible is always there. . . . [It’s] in your bones before you crack its binding” (p.4).

This is the larger religious culture into which the youth in this study, their literate practices, and their motivations for literacy were nested. Although the youth may not have been cognizant of this culture – none of them mentioned it – it influenced much of what the youth

did or were able to do by sanctioning religious expression and demanding religious knowledge. In a word, the strong religious culture in America made it acceptable for the youth to *be* religious and engage in literate practices, even in public, if they pleased. Although some of the youth chose not to read scripture at school, for example, the practice of public scripture reading was not a criminal offense in the state, or the nation (although it could position youth in unfavorable ways). Moreover, the knowledge youth gained by being involved in religious traditions gave them access to texts, art, philosophical constructs, and metaphors found across cultural artifacts, which remained obscure to others without these youths' religious background.

Religious Institution

Institutions, such as religious denominations, can influence literate practices and what counts as literacy (Kapitske, 1995). For example, religious institutions can influence what one should (and should not) read, the manner in which one should read, and why. Here, I briefly provide historical background of both institutions and their structures to provide institutional context for understanding the literate practices in religious contexts and the motivations that drove them.

Methodism. Methodism began in 18th century England as a revival religion. John Wesley claimed he was on a divine mission to revive and restore the Church of England with renewed spiritual vigor (Tomkins, 2005). As the United Methodist Church puts it:

Wesley and his colleagues "task was not to reformulate doctrine [of the Church of England]. Their tasks were to summon people to experience the justifying and sanctifying grace of God and encourage people to grow in the knowledge and love of God through the personal and corporate disciplines of the Christian life" (United Methodist Church, "Our Distinctive Heritage as United Methodists, 2010).

One way Wesley and his colleagues did this was through small, intimate organizations of societies, bands, and classes where individuals could participate in “practical divinity” through social scripture study, singing, teaching, and fellowship. In these societies Wesley encouraged individuals to “read, write, and speak publicly about the life of the spirit” (Burton, 2008, p.1). These classes were designed to give individuals a system of support that would provide “encouragement and discipline of a religious community, as well as constant evangelical teaching” (Tomkins, 2003, p.85). The organization of the societies underscores the importance of community and spirituality to Methodism. As Wesley stated, “‘Holy solitaires’ is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than holy adulterers. The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness” (cited in Cracknell and White, 2005, p.125). This message caught on quickly, making Methodism the largest Christian religion in the United States by the 1840s.

Structurally, today’s Methodism has three distinct “branches” represented by the General Conference, the Council of Bishops, and the Judicial Council. The General Conference is an international council of almost 1,000 delegates who meet every four years. About half of the delegates are clergy, half are lay members. The members of the General Conference are the only body that can set official policy and speak for the church. At the Conference delegates discuss “today’s issues in light of scriptural teachings” and set policies about “human sexuality, abortion, war and peace . . . and funding” (United Methodist Church, “Structure and Organization”). The Conference’s actions are included in the Church’s book of law, The Book of Discipline. Social issue policies are included in the Book of Resolutions. The Council of Bishops is comprised of all the bishops in the Church. They meet at least once a year, providing supervision to the Church. The Judicial Council is the Church’s high court. It has nine members, consisting of clergy and lay members. The Council determines the constitutionality of the General

Conference's acts or proposals and whether they are in agreement with The Book of Discipline. All the Council's decisions are final.

Worldwide, Methodism has about 38 million members. The First United Methodist Church accounts for about 12 million of those members, about eight million of which are in the United States (National Council of Churches, 2007). After Southern Baptists, the United Methodist Church is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States (Prothero, 2007). Building upon Wesley's commitment to the poor, today's Methodists are actively engaged in humanitarian aid to the poor or distressed, finding their membership growing rapidly in these areas (Cracknell and White, 2005). Yet, there is no general curriculum for the youth of the Church. Methodists around the world create their own classes and determine appropriate content and resources for their members, although there are options teachers have to draw on if they want to teach particular courses. Betsy, for example, often developed curricula for youth and submitted them to the United Methodist Church for use worldwide.

Mormonism. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that it is a restoration of Jesus' ancient church. Latter-day Saints claim that prophets and apostles – Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John – returned the priesthood authority to officiate in ordinances such as baptism when the Church was restored through Joseph Smith in 1830 (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *True to the Faith*, 2004). The Church's entire organization, from general to local levels, is led by men holding this authority who claim revelation from God. As such, Latter-day Saints believe that all required guidance to lead the affairs of the Church comes by revelation. A body of lay leaders called General Authorities oversees the entire ecclesiastical organization of the Church, which has a centralized hierarchical structure. The General Authorities consist of the First Presidency of the Church, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the quorums of the seventy, and the Presiding Bishopric.

The First Presidency is the central governing body and the highest Church council. It consists of the President of the Church, who Latter-day Saints believe is a prophet like Adam, Moses, or Abraham. He and his two male counselors oversee the affairs of the Church, establishing Church policies and procedures. The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is composed of twelve men who serve as traveling witnesses of Jesus Christ. They are equal in authority to the First Presidency (Doctrine and Covenants, 107:23-24). The Quorum is organized into executive groups: the Correlation Executive Committee, the Missionary Executive Council, the Priesthood Executive Council, and the Temple and Family History Executive Council. The Correlation Committee includes the three senior apostles and oversees the work of the other three councils and directs the Church's Correlation Department, which "evaluates manuals and other materials disseminated to the membership of the Church" (Hartley, 1992). The First and Second Quorums of the Seventy each consist of 70 men who work under the direction of the Presidency of the Seventy which consists of seven presidents. The members of the Seventy serve in area presidencies around the world which oversee areas of the world. The Presiding Bishopric is composed of three General Authorities, one as Presiding Bishop, and two as counselors. This body has responsibility for the Church's temporal affairs, including caring for the poor, maintaining Church buildings, and managing investments.

Another layer of general Church organization in which many of the General Authorities serve is the general presidencies or auxiliaries. These consist of women presidencies of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary, and male presidencies of Young Men and Sunday School. The role of the auxiliaries is to "train and serve the leaders and members of their respective organizations in the [local units] of the Church" (Hartley, 1992). The Priesthood Correlation Program keeps all of these bodies and their activities working together. The Correlation Program, established in 1963, coordinates all of the Church's organizational

structures, programs, and curricula. It also maintains control of what should be taught in classrooms around the Church, by providing standard manuals and curricula (Givens, 2004).

From its modest beginnings, the Church has grown to a worldwide membership of 14 million (Hale, 2009), six million of which live in the United States. The Church is concentrated in the Western United States, with nine states identifying the Church as their state's largest or second largest religion (Jorgensen, 2009; National Council of Churches, 2007). With its American origins, rapid growth, and increasing influence, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been called "the American Religion." Preaching its particular gospel around the world, the Church has expanded prodigiously, leading some to herald it as the next world religion (Givens, 2004), or the "first great world religion since Islam (Prothero, 2007; see also Stark, 1984/1998).

Community

Heath's (1983) work highlights, among other things, the importance of understanding the civic community within which individuals live, even as it relates to religious literacies (see also Poveda, Cano, Palomares-Valera, 2005). Such is the case here. Greenview City was a Midwestern, college city with a population of approximately 115,000. The university was the major employer in the city, directly and indirectly employing over 40,000 people. The university contributed to the city's thriving music and arts culture, which was seen through numerous musical and theatrical performances and art shows. Each summer the annual art fair drew people from across the country. For Methodists, this community context was important. The Church sponsored numerous music recitals and performances held in the church's chapel, or sanctuary. Greenview City was also known nationally for its liberal politics. The Methodists accepted the city's liberal views. For example, in our first conversation Betsy stated that I could work with the youth attending her church, but said, "We're a little more liberal than most [Methodist churches]." She compared her congregation's liberalness with another Methodist

congregation in a neighboring city. Other Methodists confirmed this. Moreover, some Methodist youth attributed (or justified) their “liberal” interpretation of scripture to the “liberal” community context of Greenview City. During interviews and observations Methodist youth referenced Greenview City as a place where diversity of opinion was accepted, and even expected.

For Latter-day Saints, Greenview City was important because of its location. The Midwest, for Latter-day Saints, lies well outside of the Church’s North American population center in the Western United States and along the Wasatch Front, particularly in Utah. Latter-day Saint youth in Greenview City were aware of their position as religious minorities in the Midwest. Some of them made statements about how their lives would have been different if they were in largely populated Latter-day Saint areas, like Salt Lake City, Utah. Priscilla, for example, said it would “be easier to go to school there.” Latter-day Saint youth attending one of the local high schools mentioned, with a mix of pride and melancholy, that of the more than 3,000 youth in their school, only 13 were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, being on the fringes of Mormonism geographically was not necessarily a disadvantage. Vincent stated that “the youth can be a lot stronger here” because they could not rely on other like-minded Latter-day Saints to support them. They had to rely on themselves. Indeed, some of the youth appeared to appreciate the perspective Greenview City offered them of their own position in the world, especially the males who were planning on serving a Latter-day Saint proselytizing mission which they knew would probably take them to places where The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was not at the center of community life.

At the time of the study, the American economy was struggling under unusual financial strain. Greenview City was located in geographic area particularly hard hit by a downturn in the American economy, although Greenview City appeared to weather the downturn better than

other cities in the area. Nevertheless, the employment of many of the youths' parents' was affected.

Congregation

Religious congregations can be important contexts for understanding the development and influence of religious literacies (Baquedano-Lopez, 2000; Zinsser, 1986). In this study, the congregation is important because it is the explicit religious context that I studied; that is, I studied the youth *in* their immediate, public religious environments. *Congregation* has two important meanings. First, it represents the denominations' physical locations for worship services or other activities. I describe the physical contexts of both denominations below.

Methodist Physical Contexts. The First United Methodist Church of Greenview City is a 170 year old building in the heart of downtown Greenview City. The building is constructed of large grey-green stones and is a landmark in the city, and nearly as old as the city itself. The building has had a long history, which is carefully documented in the building itself with historical photographs and descriptions of key events. In total, the building and its grounds occupy a city block. As one enters the main entrance from the parking lot, one passes under a large lancet window approximately 30 feet tall that extends from the just above the door to the top of the open stairway on the third floor. The foyer is decorated with wood trim. Opposite the window is a large intricately-cut stone window inlaid with stained glass. In the center, is an outlined image of a male figure wearing a robe, presumably Jesus.

The most striking feature of the building is the Sanctuary, or chapel, where congregational worship services were held. It is a long room on the main floor. It has a high, arched ceiling. Dark, wooden beams ran parallel with the pews. On each side of the Sanctuary rows of stained glass windows contained numerous Christian symbols, such as the Bible. At the

front of the Sanctuary, at the top of the arched ceiling a large, round stained glass window is set into the wall. At certain times of the day, colored light flooded into the Sanctuary.

Outside the Sanctuary, just beneath the stained glass window, on the third floor, a mural extends the length of the stairwell. The mural depicts events from the life of Jesus and the Bible. Short passages from the Bible accompany each image. A ten foot banner hangs from the railing of the third floor. It extends to the bottom of the second floor. In large scripted blue letters it reads, "Build the Church." A number of colored, felt cut-out hands radiate from the center. The youth meet on the third floor, in a large room, for Sunday school in the morning and Methodist Youth Fellowship in the evening.

On a typical Sunday morning the youth sip hot chocolate and eat doughnuts as adults make announcements. Between the Sunday morning Sol Café⁷ and the Sunday evening Youth Fellowship, roughly, 150 youth attend. They sit around circular tables and many more stand along the back and sides of the room. Each table has a candle center piece. The youth wear jeans, shorts, T-shirts, and hoodies. Generally, 15-20 adults line the sides and back of the room. Vaulted ceilings make the room feel even bigger. Several windows line the outside corner of the room. They each have curtains thin enough to let in the sunlight. Across the top of one wall are the words: "May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you." Another wall contains the conclusion of the phrase: "May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen" (Methodist, September 28, 2008).

Latter-day Saint Physical Contexts. The Latter-day Saints' building is located outside of Greenview City in a neighboring community, but its membership is drawn from Greenview City. The building was built recently in a manner that most Latter-day Saints could recognize by sight

⁷ Sol Café was the name of the Methodist's Sunday school program in which youth selected semester long courses of study to attend with their peers each Sunday morning. Classes were taught by adult Methodist members of the congregation.

as a Latter-day Saint meeting house. One of the building's distinctive features is its spire on the roof. Unlike many other Christian religions, Latter-day Saint buildings do not have crosses. The building is rectangular in shape and decorated inside with muted browns, greens, and tans. Religious art depicting scenes from Jesus' life hang on the walls in the foyers and hallways. The floors are carpeted, and the walls up to the wainscoting. The pews in the chapel are oriented toward the podium and choir seats, much like the Methodist's, but there is no art, or stained glass in the chapel. Other than seats and a podium, only a piano and an organ are on "the stand." The back of the chapel opens into a gymnasium with a full-sized basketball court. The accordion doors are closed during worship services. Because this building is not centrally located for the youth, early morning seminary is held in another building in Greenview City owned by the Church. The seminary building is downtown in an historic residence that has been renovated to fit the needs of the Church.

The room in which seminary is held has a piano in the far corner. The room is arranged with four long, thin tables in two rows of two facing a white board with sliding panels. Each table has four molded plastic chairs. A podium with wheels is centered in front of the room. Over the whiteboard hang 8x10 photos of the leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. From left to right, the first three are set apart from the rest. They are the President of the Church and his two counselors. The other twelve are the members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. These fifteen men constitute the governing body of the LDS church.

Fifteen colored 11x17 inch art prints from the Bible and the Book of Mormon decorate the walls. Two large, colored maps of Israel and Jerusalem hang on one wall. Chronologies entitled "The Life of Jesus Christ" and "The Savior's Final Week" are pinned to the wall just below the maps. There are three large, framed pieces of art in the room. The largest, centered on the back wall over the unused fireplace, depicts a scene from the Book of Mormon where

Jesus appears to the inhabitants of the Americas after his resurrection. The other two paintings are on adjacent walls. One depicts Carl Bloch's 1872 depiction of the New Testament scene where Jesus talks to the Samaritan women at a well. A large grid made out of poster board hangs next to this. Fifteen names run vertically along the left margin. The top two names are the teachers. The remaining thirteen are the students. Twenty-five New Testament scripture reference run horizontally along the top. These are their Scripture Mastery verses. They are verses that the General Authorities of the church have identified as important for students to learn and memorize during their study of the New Testament. The third piece of framed art is also by Carl Bloch. It is his 1883 depiction of a scene from the New Testament in which Jesus is attending to a crippled man waiting at the Pool of Bethesda (Latter-day Saint, November 14, 2008).

A second meaning of *congregation* has to do with the people who represent the body of members with whom the youth fellowship and their particular literacy structures and practices. The Methodists drew their membership from Greenview City and the surrounding areas. There was not a geographic boundary determining who could attend. The congregation's membership exceeded 1,000 and consisted of children, youth, and adults. All of the Methodist youth in the study attended this congregation. The Latter-day Saints drew their membership from specific geographic regions of Greenview City. The city was divided in half. Those who lived on one side were in one congregation, or ward. Those who lived on the other side were in another ward. The Church frowned upon individuals jumping boundaries to attend a ward in which they did not live. Two wards met in this building, but it was also the central meeting place for six other wards during special occasions such as local conferences. All of the Latter-day Saint youth in the study attended the same ward. In total, about 300 people regularly attended this ward, including many young families attending graduate school at the local university.

Within these congregations I observed, and in some cases, participated in a number of religious education activities. With the Methodists I observed and participated in the Sunday morning Sol Café: Light for Teen Souls and the Sunday evening MYF. Sol Café met from 9:20-10:30 AM. It appeared to function as a Sunday school program in which adults taught small groups of youth about Methodist beliefs and practices. Approximately 45-60 youth and 15 adults met for about 15 minutes in a large, upstairs room to drink hot chocolate, eat pastries, sing, and talk to each other, and listen to announcements. After a prayer, they separated to their classes, which they selected from about five being offered each semester. Each class lasted for an academic semester. I attended the Divine Light Media class and the Fruits of the Spirit class the first semester. In the second semester I attended Confirmation, The Last Lecture, and Sex, God, and Morality. The number of youth attending each class varied from between 10-20, depending on the class.

A Typical Sunday for Methodists. In one Fruits of the Spirit class 13 youth and three adults sat on couches and upholstered chairs arranged in a circle. The following description of the class is excerpted from field notes. It provides a representative example of the way youth and adults used scripture, engaged in conversations, and, in general, interacted with each other during Sol Café classes.

To begin class we stand in a circle holding hands. Richard [the adult leading the class] starts the prayer, then the person on his left adds to it, then me, and so on until we've gone around the circle. Most of us thank God for various things. Richard asks the class what the most important thing is that we can know. Several youth respond with, "That God loves you," and "He has a plan for you." Melinda says that she is talking about this same question in her high school "soc" (sociology) class. Kate chooses her words

carefully. As she shares, her peers appear to listen and the adults comment on her thoughtfulness.

Another adult asks, “What is the most important thing you can do?” Kate again speaks. She says that she goes to a Catholic school. She talks about the differences between Catholics and Methodists. She says that her biggest problem with Catholicism is that they believe that during the communion the bread and water become Christ’s body and blood. Others contribute to Kate’s comments about Catholicism and Methodism. Here is a list of what they say:

- Catholicism: too structured, it has too many “have tos,” it focuses on works over grace, talks a lot about sin, members are not allowed to question things, and are spoon-fed their religion by the priests, churches don’t have Bibles in their pews, it’s “hard to free-think,” members are very committed, and good people.
- Methodism: free-thinkers, grace over works, and more accepting of others’ differences than Catholics.

Richard offers a short history of Catholicism and Protestantism. He says that Catholics are rule-oriented. Protestant comes from *protest*. He talks about original sin and guilt. Another adult asks, “What does heaven on earth look like?” A youth says that it looks like people looking at people for *who* they are, not *what* they are. His peers nod in agreement. The same adult asks, “What makes the earth not heavenly?” Melinda says that she talked about this in “soc,” too. She says that loss of youth innocence makes the

earth not heavenly. Others say that the trouble is “the quest for power,” “pride,” and “lack of morals.” One of the adult says that “morality is vanishing from our culture.”

Richard directs the class to silently read Galatians 5:19-26 from a handout provided he provided for them. When everyone is done Richard leads a discussion about “the dark side of human nature” in verses 19-21 and the “God-nature” identified in verses 22-26.

Richard says that Jesus is the root; we are attached to the root, so we are the fruit (Methodist, December, 7, 2008).

Following Sol Café, the youth and adults gathered once again at the church for MYF.

Methodist Youth Fellowship ran for two hours Sunday nights (6:00-8:00 PM). Approximately 80 youth and 15-20 adults met to eat dinner and talk, play games, and engage in religious instruction. Everybody met in the social hall, a large common area located in a step-down basement, adjacent to the kitchen. Tables were set up for the meal. Here is a typical outline of an evening of MYF:

- Meal and Welcome: The evening began in the social hall with a youth or adult offering a prayer, after which the youth and adults began to eat. The meal lasted about 30 minutes. Meals included grilled-cheese sandwiches, pancakes, or pasta. The youth appeared to self-segregate by age: junior high school students and senior high school students. The junior high students often ate in gender segregated groups. The high school students did not. The meal was a highly social time. As youth were finishing their meals, an adult offered announcements. After the announcements, they sang a song together and then the junior and senior high school youth separated for the rest of the night. I observed the high school group.

- **Game:** A group game followed the meal. During the warm months the youth often played games that involved everyone outside on the church's lawn. These included human foosball, and elaborate games of tag. When it was colder, they moved the tables and played games inside the social hall. The games allowed any youth who was able, to participate. On any given night, I counted one to three youth not playing for personal or health reasons. The games lasted about 30 minutes.
- **Program:** The "program" followed the game. This was the ostensible purpose of MYF. It consisted of religious instruction by one or more of the adult leaders. Sometimes youth stayed in the social hall. Other times they went to other large rooms in the church. There was often a media component such as viewing video segments or PowerPoint presentations, or listening to music. The programs were designed to be interactive. Youth were often out of their seats talking to each other in small groups and then reconvening and discussing their experiences or ideas as a large group. The programs lasted about 60 minutes.
- **Prayer:** The night ended with everyone standing in a circle, holding each others' hands with right hands crossed over left. While standing in a circle everyone orally recited the words inscribed on the walls of one of the rooms: "May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen." At this point, everyone spun around, uncrossing arms. Some of the youth said, "Whee!" as they spun around. Sometimes an adult or youth offered a short prayer before the choral recitation.

A Typical Seminary Class for Latter-day Saints. With the Latter-day Saints I observed seminary and, on occasions, Sunday worship services. Seminary is a Church-sponsored

educational program for high school aged youth. All high school aged Latter-day Saint youth are encouraged to complete the four-year course of religious study that consists of Old Testament, New Testament, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants. The latter two years focus on two of the standard works unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Seminary was held each school day. In locations with higher populations of Latter-day Saint youth seminary is often provided as a high school elective integrated into the youths' daily school schedules. These classes are often taught by full-time instructors in the employ of the Church. In the Midwest and other locations without large populations of Latter-day Saint youth seminary is often held in the early morning before school starts; in this case from 6:15-7:20 AM. Often, volunteer members of the local congregation teach these classes. Worldwide, approximately 350,000 Latter-day Saint youth attend seminary ("Education," n.d.). I also observed part of their Sunday worship services, which consisted of a three hour block divided into three parts. For the first hour the entire congregation met in the chapel for a worship service called sacrament meeting (which I observed, on occasion). It included songs, prayers, talks by the lay membership of the congregation, and partaking of the Holy Communion, or sacrament, as they called it. In the second hour the youth attended Sunday school classes (which I observed, on occasion) designated by age. Males and females met together. Two classes consisted of six to nine youth on any given Sunday. Teachers were appointed by the congregational leader. The last hour female youth attended Young Women and male youth attended Young Men (which I did not observe). For these classes the youth were designated by gender. Typically, the Latter-day Saint youth in this study attended all three hours of a Sunday worship service.

The New Testament was the course of study the year that I observed this seminary class. Thirteen youth regularly attended the class each weekday morning. A young married

couple taught the class. They alternated weeks, so one taught for a week, then the other. The class met in downtown Greenview City. Here is a general outline of a typical day in seminary:

- **Welcome:** One of the two seniors in class welcomed the students to class. She called on someone to say the opening prayer. During prayers everyone closed their eyes, folded their arms, and bowed their heads. After the prayer she asked for any announcements from the students, and then asked someone to say the closing prayer when class was over. She then invited the student who had signed up to offer the morning devotional to come to the front of the class.
- **Devotional:** The student providing the devotional stood alone at the front of the class. Each month the teachers gave the students a theme such as their favorite General Conference talk, their favorite thing about Christmas, or a principle such as faith. For their part, the students delivering the devotionals often talked about what text they had selected, why, and why it was meaningful. The person providing the devotional was the only one speaking. His peers listened. When he was done, he said, "In the name of Jesus Christ, amen." His peers repeated, "Amen." Most devotionals lasted between 15 and 30 seconds.
- **Scripture Mastery⁸:** Following the devotional, the teacher usually led the youth in a five to ten minute scripture mastery activity that was designed to help students learn/memorize specific scriptural passages. These games included a Pictionary-like game in which one youth drew a representation of a scripture mastery passage and

⁸ The principles guiding seminary instruction for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are organized into a statement referred to as "The Teaching Emphasis" (Teaching Emphasis, 2009). It states that seminary teachers are to "emphasize the mastery of key scriptural passages and help students understand and explain the doctrines and principles contained in those passages" (Ibid). These passages contain doctrine that the Church considers important for every member to know. For each year of study the Church designated 25 scripture mastery passages. Each of them ranges from one to five verses in length. They are taken from the King James Version of the Bible. Seminary students are encouraged to memorize these passages. In this class, the teachers placed a chart on the wall to track students' memorization of the passages throughout the year.

his peers tried to guess the reference. Other games included flashcards. The teacher held up 8 ½ x 11 inch “cards” that had the biblical reference on one side and a short, descriptive phrase about the content of the passage on the other. The teacher showed the class one side. The class called out the corresponding side. At the end of these games students often verbally indicated their desire to continue.

- **Doctrinal Instruction:** The doctrinal instruction followed the scripture mastery activity. The doctrinal instruction was the largest segment of time in the class, lasting up to 45 minutes some days. Instruction followed a schedule provided by the Church. Teachers knew which passages they were to cover each week. The teachers of this class tried to adhere to the schedule, but indicated it was sometimes difficult to “cover everything” in the depth they wanted to provide. During the instructional time students usually sat in their seats with their Bibles opened. Sometimes they highlighted passages with colored pencils and wrote notes in the margins of verses. Youth spoke very little during this time.
- **Prayer:** After the instruction, the student designated at the beginning of class said a closing prayer. The student stood, often near his seat. The one offering the prayer, and his peers, closed their eyes, bowed their heads, and folded their arms. The prayers often consisted of thanking God for letting them come to seminary, and asking for help remembering and applying what they learned. The prayers ended with the person offering the prayer saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.” His peers then said, “Amen.”

With few exceptions, the Latter-day Saint and Methodist religious contexts followed the aforementioned patterns of organization each time I observed them. The Methodists’ religious contexts typically included reading a few verses of scripture, much discussion and personal

connections, and demonstrative social interaction. For the evening MYF the prayer, meal, and welcome were followed by a group game, religious instruction, and then concluded with a prayer. In seminary, the Latter-day Saint youth read up to a chapter of scripture at each class, they did not engage in discussions much, and their social interaction appeared less demonstrative than the Methodists'. Every seminary class began with a prayer and welcome. These were followed by a student devotional, a scripture mastery activity, and then religious instruction. Each class ended with a prayer. For both denominations, religious literacy instruction was a central feature of their religious contexts. In the following section I extend the description of religious contexts by providing an analysis of the general models of religious literacy instruction for both denominations. This analysis provides a clearer perspective of the congregational instructional contexts in which Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth were situated.

General Models of Religious Literacy Instruction. I asked Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) why she attended religious services. She said simply "to learn and understand the scriptures better." This was a very important phrase because understanding scripture – the stories, principles, and morals – was of paramount concern for most of the youth (Chapter Seven). The youth stated that they wanted to know more about scripture. In terms of substance, religious learning was often more valuable than school learning; as Samantha (Latter-day Saint) said, "what we're learning [in church] is much more permanent than [what we learn in] school." Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) said that in comparison to school, in religious services he learned "the things that are important in like an eternal perspective." Other youth made similar statements about the importance of what they learned in religious contexts. So, what did this learning look like?

In what follows, I identify the dominant methods of instruction in both religious contexts to provide a sense of the instruction the youth were commonly engaged with and to

demonstrate one way in which the youth from both denominations developed the literate practices discussed in this study. The Latter-day Saints in this congregation generally used a prepare-read-recall-elaborate-apply pattern. The Methodists in this congregation generally used a prepare-read-elaborate/discuss-apply pattern. There were clear overlaps in these teaching/learning patterns, but there were also some important differences. Youth in both denominations came to rely on these patterns because they helped the youth develop their religious literacies and knowledge. The most valued literate practices threading through these patterns were scripture reading, and for the Methodists, discussions. These practices often worked together.

Prepare: Latter-day Saint and Methodist. Preparation was about setting the stage for instruction. It included engaging in brief introductory activities that related to the day's lesson. Both denominations engaged in various preparation activities; however, I could discern no appreciable differences between Latter-day Saint and Methodist use of preparation activities. Across both denominations teachers used object lessons, group activities, music, questions, images, and writing activities to prepare the youth for instruction. In this section, I provide several representative examples from both denominations.

As an example of an object lesson, the Latter-day Saint seminary teacher placed three white Styrofoam cups on a table in front of the class. She asked a student to explain what he saw. The student looked inside the cups and said, "One cup is clean. One cup is dirty. And one is really dirty" (Latter-day Saint, December 10, 2008). The teacher then explained that even though some things may look good on the outside, inside they can be dirty. She used this as an introduction to their day's study of Matthew 23 about hypocrisy.

On another occasion, Methodist students were instructed to interact with each other preceding a lesson entitled, "The Perfect Family":

[The teacher] instructs the youth to write down one trait of a perfect family and then mingle to find other traits that work together to create a perfect family. Once they find compatible traits they stick together, forming a “family.” Once youth form families they read their combined characteristics to the whole group. The family groups then make two lists: characteristics of good siblings, and characteristics that they do not like about siblings. The families share their lists with the whole group (Methodist, November 2, 2008).

Following this activity, the teacher then moved into the heart of the lesson by reading and retelling stories of siblings from the Bible. He recounted the stories of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and the Prodigal Son, focusing on the relationships of each of these pairs of siblings and how they did or did not demonstrate “The Perfect Family.”⁹

One morning in seminary the teacher talked to the Latter-day Saint youth about conversion stories, or stories about people learning about and being converted to the Church. She asked the class who knew a conversion story. Three youth raised their hands and said that their parents were converts to the Church. Two of them share their parents’ stories. I continue the episode as contained in my field notes:

[The teacher] shares her mother’s conversion story. The students seem alert, attentive. They are looking at the teacher. After she tells them about her mother’s conversion to the Church, [the teacher] tells them to turn to John 9. This they do. [The teacher] hands out a paper and tells the students to read John 9 and fill out the handout by identifying who said what. She wants them to do this individually (Latter-day Saint, November 19, 2008).

⁹ The teacher appeared to use the phrase “the perfect family” sarcastically to draw attention away from such characteristics as the marital status of parents or the number of siblings, to qualities such as love and patience. The teacher was encouraging youth to redefine “the perfect family.”

Approximately ten minutes later, after the youth completed the activity and they were talking about who said what in John 9,¹⁰ the teacher drew attention to the man's words in several places throughout the chapter. She said that John 9 was this man's conversion story, and that his words show how he came to believe in Jesus through his experiences with Jesus and the Pharisees.

One night at MYF to begin a lesson on "Sovereign God" the Methodist youth join in a game of "Mother, May I," which the adult leading the lesson renamed, "King/Queen, May I." Typically, this game is played by having one person be the mother, or in this case the king or queen. The other players line up some distance away from the mother, forming a line parallel to the mother. The object of the game is to touch the mother. There are variations in the way in which the players can get to the mother, but one constant is that players must ask the mother's permission to move using the phrase, "Mother, may I?" The players only move if granted permission by the mother. Here is how the game worked in this MYF:

Sarah and Melinda are joint queens. They tell certain people or groups what to do. If they don't do it or don't do it in the way the queens want them to do it, the queens tell them to go back [to the starting line]. . . . [The queens] are capricious and fickle, telling the girls to move five steps forward, and the boys to move five *baby* steps forward. . . . This begins to bother some of the other youth. They begin to complain about the queens. The adult leading the lesson stops the game after about 5 minutes. He tells [the youth] to turn around and sit down. On the screen behind the youth . . . is a PowerPoint slide with characteristics of kings. The list includes the following characteristics: harsh, forgiving, sneaky, gentle, and moody. The teacher asks, "What was the problem with

¹⁰ John 9 contains an account of Jesus healing a man who was born blind. As this man is questioned by the Pharisees, he explains how he was healed by Jesus. He calls Jesus "a man," (11) and then "a prophet," (17) and at the end he states that he believes that Jesus is the Son of God (38). The seminary teacher used this as an example of this man's personal conversion to Jesus.

the [queens] (meaning Sarah and Melinda)?" One youth says, "They don't listen." The teacher asks, "Do you think that we don't listen to God sometimes?" Melinda exclaims, "That was an awesome link!" (Methodist, November 9, 2008).

The lesson continued by exploring the qualities of God contained in scripture, some of God's names, and what youth expected from God.

In this final example of preparing the youth for instruction, the Latter-day Saint seminary teacher asked her class, "What decisions have you had to make?" After they identified a number of decisions, the teacher asked, "What's the most important decision that you will make?" She held up a wedding picture and asked what the world thinks about marriage. The youth generated a list that included: two people in love, 'till death do you part, commitment, don't value it as much, not the most important thing. The teacher asked what the Church thinks of marriage. The youth generated this list: for time and all eternity, a man and a woman, most important decision you'll make, sacred ordinance, something to prepare for. The teacher then asked the students to turn to Matthew 22:3-9 where they read the parable of the marriage of the king's son as an introduction to their lesson on marriage (Latter-day Saint, November 18, 2008).

In the prepare phase teachers from both denominations attempted to prepare students to engage in the lesson through a variety of methods. Latter-day Saint instructional documents refer to this as "readiness." It involved helping the students be prepared and attentive. It was designed to draw students in by piquing their interest in the subject under study. On other occasions teachers used music, historical background, short segments from media, and brief narrations or experiences to set the stage and "get them into the lesson." One general quality of preparation activities was that they were usually done as a group. In both denominations, the success of the preparation activity often rested on youths' participation. The youth needed to

work together in some way, either physically or orally. These preparation activities may have, therefore, helped youth from both denominations view reading and learning in religious contexts as collaborative acts. Reading scripture or engaging with principles in religious contexts may have taken on a community orientation that encouraged the youth to understand religious literacy as a collaboration of devoted individuals. As demonstrated in these examples of preparation for instruction, the next move in both denominations was to read, usually from scripture.

Read: Latter-day Saint and Methodist. Reading scripture in religious contexts was an important religious literacy practice in both denominations. To more fully understand the scripture reading practices of Methodists and Latter-day Saints one must attend to the following sections on recall and elaborate. I, therefore, only briefly identify some of the characteristics of reading scripture in this section, providing a more substantive view of their overall reading practices as I weave the subsequent sections together.

Following preparation activities, youth read scripture, or occasionally secondary scriptural material, containing the messages or principles they would focus on during the lesson. In both denominations they read the passages aloud and verbatim, and there was seldom any form of oral interruption when someone read. Yet, there were some clear differences in the manner in which each denomination approached scripture. Latter-day Saint youth, for example, read from the King James Version of the Bible and other Latter-day Saint scripture identified previously. As a class, the youth often read several verses, usually a verse at a time until the passage was read. These passages could, on occasion, be as long as an entire chapter (John 9; Latter-day Saint, November 19, 2009). The Latter-day Saint youth also carried scripture with them to religious services or had a personal set stored for use in religious classrooms. During religious instruction, Latter-day Saint youth read from these bound, personally owned copies of

scripture. When the passage was read, Latter-day Saint youth left their Bibles open on their tables, returning to them often to reread or mark in them as the lesson continued. Latter-day Saint youth used scripture as a source of information, often trying to understand the events and characters of the actual narratives. Reading was often about knowing content (as I will show). Latter-day Saint youth also tried to connect scripture to their own experiences and made connections across scriptural texts, using a method called “scripture chains” where they wrote other references in the margins that corresponded to the verses they were studying (Latter-day Saint, November 19, 2008).

Methodist youth read from various translations of the Bible, although they seemed to prefer the translation provided in the New Revised Standard Edition and The Message. Methodist youth did not carry scripture with them, nor did they have personal sets of scripture for use in classrooms; instead, they read from bound, church-owned copies of scripture, handouts with scripture references, or from large projection screens with scripture on them. The Bible passages usually consisted of one to seven verses. After the passage was read, Methodist youth rarely appeared to reread the passage. If they read from a bound copy of the Bible, then they often closed the book after the passage was read. Discussions often followed reading a passage (next section). These discussions were an important part of using scripture. Methodists usually used scripture to introduce or continue a discussion or, less often, to provide evidence to support a larger point someone was making. Methodists also connected scripture to their experiences, but made fewer scripture-scripture connections than Latter-day Saint youth.

In addition to reading scripture, youth occasionally read from secondary scriptural material –texts they considered important, but read and referred to much less often than scripture. Secondary scriptural material included a number of church-approved texts, or texts approved for use in religious contexts, such as religious magazines for children, youth, and

adults, words of modern church leaders (Latter-day Saint), official Church statements, pamphlets or booklets such as *For the Strength of Youth* (Latter-day Saint), daily devotionals (Methodist), and student manuals for religious study.

In the next section I address the next part of the Latter-day Saints' general model of religious literacy instruction: Recall. I then address the next element in both models: Elaborate.

Recall: Latter-day Saint. An important part of Latter-day Saints' scripture reading was recalling what the passage said. Following the reading of a passage, youth were often asked to summarize or paraphrase the passage. Here is a representative example. After reading I Corinthians 15:20-22, the teacher turned to a student, called him by name, and asked him to "[T]ell us what these verses are telling us." The youth reread quietly and then said that "everyone will be resurrected" (Latter-day Saint, January 8, 2009). Sometimes the teacher asked for more recall, as in the following example. The youth just read Alma 13:27-28 from the Book of Mormon. The teacher called a student by name and asked, "What are these verses talking about?" The student rephrased the verses. The teacher asked, "What are the three things that Alma says that we can do, or should do, so that we cannot 'be tempted above that which we are able.'" The student repeated part of the passage, stating, "humble ourselves, pray, watch and pray." The teacher then asked, referring again to material in the verses, "What are the things God says that we can have if we do these three things?" (Latter-day Saint, December 11, 2008). The youth were asked to recall the events of scripture passages on most days in seminary. Sometimes when asking them to recall event(s) of a passage that appeared obvious, youth did not respond. One example of this was when the youth just read John 13:8-10 in which Jesus washed his apostle Peter's feet. The teacher asked, "Okay, what did [Jesus] just do to them?" Nobody responded. The teacher continued, moving beyond recall questions, into interpretative questions. He asked, "If Jesus did this to you, what would you say? Why would Christ wash their

feet? Is there anything equivalent in our culture that would fit into this? Why did he do this?” (Latter-day Saint, December 17, 2008).

Recall questions appeared to draw attention back to the verses that were just read. I observed that when a youth was asked to summarize a passage he and many of his peers often looked back into the text, apparently rereading. Recalling may have encouraged the Latter-day Saint youth to attend to what they understood scripture to say – its actual words. Given that many of the Latter-day Saint youth could recite stories from the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Church history on demand, I concluded that attending to the actual events of the texts may have been one factor influencing their ability to recall a number of important religious events from scripture. Recalling may have also encouraged Latter-day Saint youth to attend to specific events before engaging in interpretive practices that got at what the verses might have meant (as with the practices involved in elaboration). By summarizing the content of scripture, Latter-day Saint youth may have understood that for them it was important to tread carefully into scriptural interpretations by knowing first what scripture said.

Methodists did not include the recall step in their model of religious literacy instruction. After reading a passage, they began trying to make sense of it through discussions and other activities. Following recall, Latter-day Saints engaged in similar practices.

Elaborate: Latter-day Saint and Methodist. Elaborations consisted of any number of methods aimed at extending or deepening understanding of passages or principles. These included teacher-directed questions, activities, discussions, lectures, media, and narrations of scriptural events. Elaborations built upon the preparation activities and the passages read. Indeed, read and elaborate were closely connected for Latter-day Saints and Methodists. Elaborations also included the greatest variety of instructional approaches and often the greatest amount of student involvement in both denominations. Moreover, the various

methods of elaboration appeared to be critical for helping youth gain a better understanding of what they read. Both denominations used various elaboration methods; however, Methodists were characterized by their use of media, and extensive use of discussion. I provide representative examples from both denominations.

Latter-day Saint Elaboration Approaches. Latter-day Saints used a variety of elaboration approaches. Here is a particularly succinct example of approaches aimed at elaborating during religious instruction in a Latter-day Saint seminary class (italicized).¹¹ Youth were reading John 11. It begins with a messenger telling Jesus that his friend Lazarus is very sick in a neighboring city. The teacher *asked the students what they would say* if they were one of Jesus' disciples and someone told them that one of their good friends was going to die (drawing attention to Jesus' decision to wait several days before leaving to Bethany to help Lazarus). After reading a few more verses, the teacher *talked about* Martha's faith in Jesus. The teacher then *identified* a number of miracles in The Book of John and *explained* the importance of faith in his own life. He then *narrated* the rest of the story, ending with Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. The teacher said that this was symbolic of the resurrection, *comparing* their inability to understand explanations of things they did not know about with the people of Bethany and Jesus' disciples' inability to understand the resurrection. The teacher then gave the students *an activity* connecting the events in John 11 with events from the final week of Jesus' life which they completed silently before sharing their responses (Latter-day Saint, December 1, 2008).

In this example, the teacher elaborated on passages in John 11 by doing the following: (a) asking the students hypothetical questions, (b) lecturing about particular principles, such as miracles and the importance of faith in one's life, (c) narrating parts of the episode, (d) making

¹¹ These methods were not unique to Mormonism; Methodist teachers also used them. I used this example from a Latter-day Saint seminary class out of convenience and for the sake of brevity; that is, the teacher used so many elaboration techniques at one time.

connections to previous events, and (e) introducing and completing activities. All of the elaboration methods identified here occurred in relationship to the passages youth were reading. These and other approaches occurred regularly – every time they read scripture – in this Latter-day Saint seminary class.

Another method of elaborating not identified in the previous example was comparing the events or principles in scripture to other things (what might be called, a comparative example). One morning in seminary the youth were studying Acts 20:28-30¹² in the Bible in which Paul addresses the “grievous wolves” that will enter the church “flock” after he leaves (29). Paul also states that within the flock “shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (30). The seminary teacher asked, “How can teaching false doctrine be like a wolf coming into the flock?” One of the youth responded in a short phrase and then the teacher related a story of the dogs he had when he was a child. He said that one of them attacked and severely injured one of their family’s goats. The family attended to the goat, but the goat died a few months later. The dog ended up attacking the other goat. The teacher suggested that the purpose of sharing the story was to provide an example to illustrate the passage they were reading. The teacher said, “Grievous wolves. Someone you love can completely destroy what you are supposed to take care of.” The teacher continued, saying that the goat did not die from the attack, but from the infection. “This is what can happen,” he said, referring to the passage about the wolves. “Spiritually, we can die from the infection of the wolves, not the original attack” (Latter-day Saint, February 20, 2009).

Elaborating on scripture included a variety of ways to make scripture more meaningful to the youth. Although it was difficult to identify with much certainty the impact of elaborations

¹² Acts 20:28-30 (King James Version): **28** Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. **29** For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. **30** Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

on the Latter-day Saint youth's conceptions of religious literacy learning, some of the youth claimed to recognize the importance of elaboration in their religious learning. Jonathan and Samantha (Latter-day Saint), for example, discussed how reading scripture in religious contexts was facilitated by elaboration techniques. Jonathan indicated the place of elaborations in religious contexts when he stated that they provided him with essential information that he needed to understand the scriptures. He said, "[A]t Church [the teachers] can kind of give you better background for what's going on and what's the situation, and that can kind of make the scriptures relate better." In this case, background information about scripture provided by teachers appeared to help Jonathan make sense of scripture and help it relate to his life. Samantha made a similar claim about the importance of teachers elaborating on scripture. She said:

Sometimes after reading something for the first time I'll just go back and just try to really . . . like when a teacher or some[one] is clarifying it I'll be like, "I get it!" It's more when other people are trying to explain it that it clicks into place for me.

Hearing others talking about scripture helped Jonathan and Samantha make sense of difficult aspects of their religious study. From my observations, and statements such as this from the youth, elaboration practices appeared to help Latter-day Saint youth make sense of some of the important principles and lessons during religious instruction.

Methodist Elaboration Approaches. Methodists also employed a number of techniques intended to extend or deepen youths' understanding of scripture or important principles in their religious and cultural traditions; however, the most prominent and valued was discussion. As identified in this dissertation, Methodist cultural practices and student responses suggest the critical place discussions played in this Methodist community. Discussion was integrally linked with scripture reading. The Methodists in this study, however, also used media to help elaborate

principles or scriptural passages. First, I provide representative examples of discussions as a critical part of scripture reading. Next, I provide a representative example of the use of media to deepen youths' learning.

In the Sex, God, and Morality class the teacher was discussing “watching ourselves and what we do.” She read from 1 Corinthians 6:9-12 in the Bible and then the class engaged in a discussion about the passage. The passage talked about sexual and other types of “wrong” (9) and becoming “a slave” (12) to appetites:¹³

The youth are quiet as [the teacher] reads. When she finished, she asks, “What do you think of these verses?” A young woman in a green jacket talks about gays and lesbians being in love, “just like any other people.” Melina asks, “Is this what we believe?” Daniel and Kate talk about the standing of the UMC [United Methodist Church] on this issue. Daniel says that “in the biblical times you had to have kids [so you had sex].” He says “homosexuality was the equivalent of sex for sex,” suggesting that homosexuals have sex solely for the sake of having sex with “no reason for populating.” [The teacher] asks how “you justify this” ostensible contradiction between what the Bible says and what we, as Methodists, believe? [The teacher] says that Paul was talking to a particular culture in Corinth. At the time the temple prostitutes were homosexual, so in talking about homosexuality, Paul was condemning “uncommitted relationships.” She says that our relationships should be committed (Methodist, February 15, 2009).

¹³ 1 Corinthians 6:9-12 (New Living Translation): **9** Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, **10** or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. **11** Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. **12** You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is good for you. And even though "I am allowed to do anything," I must not become a slave to anything.

Unlike the Latter-day Saint model of instruction that typically called for youth to recall what was read, in this example the teacher finished reading the passage and then immediately asked an interpretive question: “What do you think of these verses?” This was a common approach to engaging youth in discussions after reading a passage of scripture. On another occasion, the same teacher read a passage in Thessalonians and asked a series of interpretive questions: “What do you think of that? What does it mean in today’s world? What are some examples in your lives” (Methodist, February 22, 2009). In terms of promoting discussion, asking interpretive questions after reading a passage appeared to work. In the 1 Corinthians example, for instance, a young woman began the conversation by talking about homosexuality, which sparked a question by Melinda and responses by Daniel and Kate. Daniel’s response lead to another question by the teacher, which lead to more explanation about her interpretation of the passage in light of the historical support that she provided. In addition to discussions, Methodists also used media as a means of elaborating on scripture.

Although the following example demonstrates how media was used to deepen understanding of prayer, it also demonstrates other elaboration techniques such as discussions and the use of examples. The adult leading one MYF lesson said, “God always listens. Sometimes the answer is, ‘No.’” He then showed a clip from the movie *Meet the Parents* (2000) in which Greg Focker (Ben Stiller) is asked to say a prayer at a family meal with his fiancé’s parents. Greg appears to be trying to impress his fiancé’s parents by using what Daniel (Methodist) may have called “holy and royal” language. In the clip, Greg is clearly uncomfortable using this sort of language, and probably praying as well. When the clip is over the Methodist teacher engaged the youth in conversation:

[The teacher asked] “What does this remind you of?” After a few responses from the youth the teacher says that there is an “in-house rendition.” He identifies [a youth] by

name and the group chants [his name until he] gets up and walks to the front of the room. He begins to pray boisterously with “thee’s” and “thou’s,” using phrases . . . such as the introduction to the Gettysburg Address, references to [the movie] E.T., and “liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness.” His performance takes about two minutes. He gets a loud round of applause when he’s done.

After this performance the teacher broke the youth into small groups for about 10 minutes. In these groups they discussed a number of questions prepared by the teacher. The teacher then called everyone back together and for about 10 more minutes they discussed their responses to the questions. The next media clip was from the movie *Bruce Almighty* (2003) in which Bruce (Jim Carey) gets to play God. The clip is also about prayer:

[Bruce] is at a computer answering prayer emails. He eventually decides to answer all of them with a, “Yes.” Bruce turns to the real God, played by Morgan Freeman, to learn about the results of his actions. When the clip is over, the teacher again breaks the youth into small groups to discuss a number of questions, such as “In this clip, what happened when Bruce, using ‘God’s power,’ helped those people out?” and “Is there a time you can remember when your prayers were answered in a different way that you anticipated?” (Methodist, February 15, 2009).

In this extended example of an MYF lesson, the teacher used video clips about prayer to ostensibly deepen the youths’ understanding of prayer. As the evening drew to a close the teacher invited the youth to share their thoughts about prayer. One youth thoughtfully said, “Prayer is a time to reflect on life and be grateful.” Although this example was an instance of using media to elaborate on the youths’ understanding of prayer, it also captured – in abbreviated form – how discussion was integrated into the use of media as well. It was very

difficult in this Methodist congregation to disentangle discussion from such things as scripture reading and learning about principles, including prayer.

The manner in which each denomination read scripture may have conveyed a number of aspects of religious literacy practice to the youth. For youth from both denominations, reading and elaborating on scripture through a variety of activities such as talk, examples, lectures, and media may have signaled the importance of understanding scripture and the effort it could require to do so. Reading and elaborating on scripture may have also suggested that scripture and principles such as prayer were dense and multilayered, and that they could accommodate extended attention by the youth. For Latter-day Saint youth, reading, recalling, and elaborating may have signaled that religious literacy involved making sure that one knew what scripture said (recall) and also understanding it (elaboration). For Methodist youth, the combination of reading and discussing may have indicated the importance of interpreting scripture and understanding it in one's own terms, in one's own life.

The final step in each of the denominations' models of religious literacy instruction was application. After Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth prepared, read, and elaborated, they were encouraged to apply principles.

Apply: Latter-day Saint and Methodist. Application took place in both denominations as youth were encouraged, invited, or shown how to be like a certain character they were studying or demonstrate a particular principle (more fully) in their lives. The Methodist approach to application often included an invitation for the youth to engage in a specific action, during the lesson. The Latter-day Saint approach to application was characterized as encouragement to live in a certain way or engagement in thinking about how to apply principles. Sometimes Latter-day Saint teachers simply said that something was important and then briefly explained why. For example, at the end of a lesson about John 11 the teacher said that Jesus' raising of Lazarus

from the dead helped his disciples prepare for his own death and resurrection. The teacher then said, "This is also important for all of us. It can help us prepare for what we have not seen" (Latter-day Saint, December 1, 2008). Moreover, during a lesson about Acts 26:27-29 in the Bible in which Paul offers his Christian message to Festus and Agrippa, the teacher said, "For us, when we receive a message we can receive it with an open heart and think about it critically and think about how it applies to our lives, or we can be closed and not listen to the message. . . . When we deliver messages by the Spirit, it can make a difference" (Latter-day Saint, March 4, 2009). Other times, teachers spent several minutes asking youth questions to help them see how the principles they discussed could relate to their lives, today (Latter-day Saint, November 18, 2008). All of these examples of application from Latter-day Saint religious contexts demonstrate that application was encouraged orally. Application primarily included suggestions or insights about what one could do with principles or how they could influence one's life. The Methodist approach to application appeared more active, physical, and immediate.

On one occasion, Methodist youth had been discussing The Parable of the Mustard Seed, focusing on how small things can have big consequences. The discussion questions prompted youth to relate the parable to their own lives. One of the questions was, "What one thing would *you* do to change the world?" As a large group they said that they could (a) be nice in small ways to other people, (b) practice "radical hospitality," (c) reduce their carbon footprint, (d) build churches (which they did in Bulgaria), and (e) reduce global hunger (Methodist, September 21, 2008).

On another occasion at the conclusion of a lesson about God the youth were invited apply their knowledge and love of God by creating bumper stickers. They received a handout that looked like this:

_____ RULES

(what or who 'Rules' at your SCHOOL)

_____ RULES

(what or who 'Rules' at your HOME)

_____ RULES

(what or who 'Rules' at your LIFE)

The youth completed the handout individually in their small groups and then shared their responses. Ostensibly, the teacher desired the youth to write "God" in the at least the last line. This, however, did not occur. Those who attended the local high school said that their principal ruled their school. The second line included various responses mostly related to family members. When they got to the last one Sarah wrote "Crew." Melinda wrote, "Water" because she was in water up to 24 hours per week for sports. Nobody wrote "God," the point of the lesson (Methodist, November 9, 2008).

On another occasion, the Methodist youth were learning about God's mercy. They were in the Sanctuary, preparing to write and place their "burdens" on the altar. Betsy said, "We believe in a God of mercy and miracles." She then invited the youth to take a slip of paper from the Sanctuary pews and "write down the things that weigh upon your souls." She said, "Relieve your burdens. Write them down and know that you are forgiven." The youth were quiet as they wrote:

They begin singing *Amazing Grace* as youth and adults write down their burdens and lay them on the altar. . . . [S]lowly youth begin to file out of the pews and toward the altar. Then they go in a large, constant wave, some moving forward, others returning. Joshua puts his arm around his sister as they walk back from the altar. . . . Very few people are actually singing. The song is carried by the small band playing [at the front of the

Sanctuary]. . . . When we finish the [song the] second time Betsy stands up and says, “Go forward, free from sin” (Methodist, January 11, 2009).

This, and the other examples of Methodist youth applying the principles they learned, suggest that Methodists’ approach to application was more demonstrative than the Latter-day Saints’. The Methodist youth were often invited to act in some way to apply the principles – to say something (The Parable of the Mustard Seed), write something (God rules; God’s mercy), or do something (God’s mercy). As with the other elements in these patterns of literacy instruction, the manner in which Latter-day Saints and Methodists approached the concept of application may have shaped youths’ notions of religious literacy. Perhaps some of the clearest messages sent to youth through the attention to application were that living principles was closely linked with knowing them, and that it was important for these principles to occupy one’s life outside of religious contexts. I could not determine how much principles or ideas stayed with the youth, but observational evidence suggested that at the time of application Methodist youth were mostly participatory. For Latter-day Saint youth, it was harder to determine involvement during the application portion of the lessons because youth were listening during these parts much like they were during most of their religious instruction.

The educative quality of religious contexts was important for these youth. They indicated that they attended religious services and activities *to learn*. And many of them indicated that they did learn. Priscilla (Latter-day Saint), for example, said, “Most of what I’ve learned about the scriptures I learned in seminary.” These two models of prepare, read (recall, for Latter-day Saints), elaborate, and apply, which focused on building knowledge about one’s beliefs and applying that knowledge in one’s life, were at the core of the religious instruction the youth received. These models also demonstrated the most valued literacy practices of scripture

reading and religious discussions, and how the youth were normalized into the social and cultural practices of some of their religious literacies.

In the next section I discuss the next layer of the model, youth and family, and how the social and cultural influence of familial ways of life can shape literate practice.

Individual and Family

Families can influence literacy practices by providing contexts and purposes for developing and practicing literacy (Farr, 2000; Guerra and Farr, 2002; Heath, 1983). As Heath (1983) stated, in Roadville, "The family is believed to be integrally involved in the preparation of children for 'knowing religion'" (p.140). It is important, in this study, to understand the youth and the families with which they lived. Doing so will provide important contextual information for understanding some of the influences on the youths' religious literacies and their motivations. All of the youth were between 12 -18 years old at the beginning of the study (Table 4.1). They were all European American, and with one exception, attended public secondary schools. One Methodist youth attended a local Catholic high school. The youth planned on attending college, most locally. They had a great variety of interests and hobbies including playing video games, community service, acting, and reading. The youth were all raised in their current religious traditions, although some of them, prior to this study, fluctuated in regular church or church activity attendance. Others moved from one congregation to another, yet all of the youth indicated that they felt welcome in their current congregations. Religion and religious practices (including literacy), were, for the youth, familiar and important parts of their experiences inside and outside of church. Mostly, they read scripture, prayed, and in other ways participated in regular, and for them, traditional, religious activities. Every one of the youth rated his level of commitment to his religious tradition as high, using phrases such as, "it's very important," "the most important thing in my life," and "fundamental."

All of the youth lived in Greenview City, and judging from their homes and their parents' employment were middle class to upper middle class. Often their homes were set in quiet suburban streets, lined with trees. Their parents were employed locally as business owners, physicians, lawyers, financial managers, social workers, professors at the local university, and corporate engineers and executives. Most of the fathers had advanced degrees, as required for their employment. Most of the mothers worked at least part-time. Many youth indicated that as a family they read scripture, prayed, attended worship services, and talked about religious issues. Most often the parents of the youth in this study were raised in the religious tradition in which they were raising their children. Parents and religious tradition were powerful forces in many of these youths' lives. When I asked them how they learned to be a Latter-day Saint or a Methodist, many indicated that their parents had taught them, read scripture to them, and/or when they were younger had taken them to church, although now, nearly all of the youth said that they went to church because they wanted to.

Table 4.1 Description of Individual Participants

Name	Age	Ethnicity	SES	Religion & Commitment	School & Grade	College Plans	Interests or Hobbies
Jonah ¹⁴	13	European American	Middle class	LDS/Strong	Public/8	Maybe	Skateboarding, video games
Jonathan	13	European American	Middle class	LDS/Strong	Public/8	Yes	Basketball, video games
Paul	14	European American	Middle class	LDS/Strong	Public/9	Yes	Reading, sports, music
Priscilla	17	European American	Middle class	LDS/Strong	Public/12	Yes	Reading, guitar
Samantha ¹⁵	13	European American	Middle class	LDS/Strong	Public/8	Yes	Science fiction, blogging
Sophia	16	European American	Middle class	LDS/Strong	Public/11	Yes	Karate, volunteering
Stephen	12	European	Middle	LDS/Strong	Public/8	Yes	Basketball,

¹⁴ Jonah and Sophia are siblings. They grew up in the same home and at the time of the study still lived together with their parents and younger sibling.

¹⁵ Samantha and Timothy are siblings. They grew up in the same home and at the time of the study still lived together with their parents and younger sibling.

		American	class				music
Timothy	12	European American	Middle class	LDS/Strong	Public/7	Yes	Science fiction, fantasy
Vincent	15	European American	Middle class	LDS/Strong	Public/10	Yes	Acting, playing drums
Alex	18	European American	Middle class	FUMC/Strong	Public/12	Yes	Poetry, guitar, music
Daniel	15	European American	Middle class	FUMC/Strong	Public/10	Yes	Lacrosse, ice hockey
Jennifer	17	European American	Middle class	FUMC/Strong	Public/11	Yes	Friends, acting, singing
Joshua	17	European American	Middle class	FUMC/Strong	Public/12	Yes	Acting, volunteering
Kate	17	European American	Middle class	FUMC/Strong	Private/11	Yes	Horses, reading
Melinda	17	European American	Middle class	FUMC/Strong	Public/12	Yes	Volunteering, family
Sarah	17	European American	Middle class	FUMC/Strong	Public/12	Yes	Volunteering, sciences

As this dissertation will show, texts and textual practices are essential aspects of literacy and important to the individuals in this study and their respective religions/cultures. In classical and current social and cultural research texts and the practices that accompany them influence and are influenced by the contexts in which they are situated (Heath, 1983; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Lewis and Fabos, 2005; Moje, 2000; Rubenstein-Avila, 2007; Scribner and Coles, 1981; Street, 1984). In Chapters Six and Seven I analyze youths' conceptions of religious texts and their motivations for engaging with them. In this study, religious texts and textual practices were central across the various contexts. The Bible, for example, is important to most Americans, and was a central text to the Latter-day Saint and Methodist religious institutions, local congregations, and to the youth and their families. Scripture demanded particular attention and practices to understand it and give it the respect the youth believed it deserved; however, to engage with religious texts at home was different than doing so at church, or – if

youth did it – at school. Yet, from families to larger religious cultural contexts, religious texts and textual practices were essential, yet not always identical, across the denominations.

Summary and Conclusion

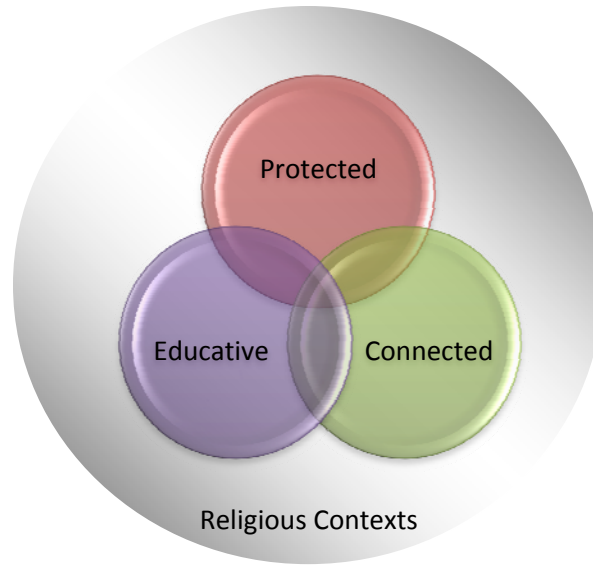
The embedded context model discussed in this chapter highlights the influence of the various social and cultural contexts influencing youths' literate practices and their motivations for literacy. Although neatly nested in concentric spheres, in theory and practice the divisions indicated in the model are much more slippery. The various contexts in which individuals live their lives are seldom isolated completely from one another; rather, these contexts bleed into each other sharing and influencing literacies, cultures, identities, and motivations. Having established the general cultural contexts of this study and the general models of religious literacy instruction I now move to the more specific cultural contexts of the youths' religious environments.

Chapter 5

Contextual Factors that Motivate Religious Youth for Literacy

In the previous chapters I identified the embedded cultural contexts of the youth in this study in order to draw attention to social and cultural contexts influencing their religious literate practices and their motivations for literacy. In this chapter, I identify the contextual factors that motivated religious youth to engage in religious literate practices. I argue that religious youth were motivated for religious literacy when texts and practices were situated in safe, connected, educative environments. These environments were safe, connected, and educative for these youth because they cohered with their cultural beliefs, values, and practices. These environments were characterized as (a) protected spaces, within which the youth had (b) strong social connections with peers that helped them (c) develop greater knowledge of their religious traditions, practices, and beliefs. This characterization of religious contexts sets these contexts apart from other contexts in which the youth did not feel (as) safe, connected, or like they were learning important things. Religious contexts were spaces literally inside sacred places, such as churches, whose doors stood as a threshold between the sacred and the profane. In these sacred spaces youth were motivated for religious literacy. This chapter details three aspects of these culturally mediated spaces and how they motivated the youth. The contextual qualities identified previously overlapped with one another – and the reader and textual factors – motivating youth to engage in religious literate practice in religious contexts (Figure 5.1). The motivating factors identified here were situated within and influenced by religious cultures and histories.

Figure 5.1: Contextual Factors that Motivate for Literacy



Protected Space and its Role in Motivation for Literacy

The description of a Methodist class entitled “The Bible. Here. Now” stated that one of the expectations was that class members would create a community of acceptance and inquiry, what it called “a safe space.” This expectation was informed by the church’s motto: Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors. This motto suggests acceptance and safety, and a high degree of personal and emotional security. These were salient features of the religious contexts in this study that motivated youth for literacy. Collectively, these characteristics produced *protected space*. For Methodists, protected space may be characterized by norms of speech and conduct that attempted to help individuals and groups engage in literacy learning without feeling like they were being judged for their participation, although this did not always occur. For the Methodist youth, these culturally situated protected spaces were places where they often felt that they could “just be free” (Sarah, Methodist) to speak and act, which motivated them to engage in literate practices, especially discussions. For Latter-day Saint youth, protected space may be characterized by the ability to learn spiritual truths by the influence of the Holy Ghost.

When they felt the presence of the Holy Ghost, Latter-day Saint youth indicated that they felt spiritually strong, which also appeared to enrich – and motivate – their literacy practices, particularly scripture reading. This section explores some of the social and cultural aspects of this protected space and how they motivated the youth for literacy. It also explores what happened when these protected spaces broke down.

“A really positive way to begin my day”: Motivating Latter-day Saint Youth for Literacy

For these Latter-day Saint youth, a religious context was protected when it fortified them spiritually, or as the youth referred to it, strengthened their testimonies. The development of testimony may have contributed to the youths’ motivation for religious literate practices. These Latter-day Saint youths’ cultural conceptions of protected space had less to do with being free to speak or act in certain ways, and more to do with experiencing the Holy Ghost. Doing so allowed them to “feel the Spirit,” or have “spiritual experiences,” which, for them, appeared to be the hallmark of a safe, sacred environment.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that the Holy Ghost is a member of the Godhead – along with God and Jesus – and that the Holy Ghost does not have a body, but “is a personage of spirit” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22). This means that the Holy Ghost can “dwell in us” (Ibid) and comfort, reassure, guide, and purify individuals. The Church also teaches that the Holy Ghost is omniscient (Doctrine and Covenants 42:17; John 14:26) and that the Holy Ghost’s primary mission is to testify of truth (John 15:26; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5). Efforts to create a protected/spiritual space for learning (described previously) could invite the Holy Ghost into a context and provide a space for the Spirit to reveal truth to individuals (Nelson, 1992). When the Latter-day Saint youth in this study believed that the Spirit was present they felt that they could more readily learn important lessons and principles than when the Spirit was not present. In this

way, the Latter-day Saint youth believed that the Holy Ghost produced spiritual knowledge, or what they called testimony or truth.¹⁶

Specifically, the Spirit appeared to function in Latter-day Saint religious contexts to help youth make sense of words, stories, and experiences by turning these words, stories, and experiences into spiritually and personally meaningful knowledge. This spiritual knowledge did not appear to be simply intellectual understanding. It appeared to be affective truth, that the youth felt was binding on them morally. In short, the Latter-day Saint youth indicated (as the following exemplars will demonstrate) that the Holy Ghost produced testimony or knowledge of religious principles and doctrine; and that, I argue may have motivated some of the youth for religious literacy. To begin, I demonstrate the importance of the Holy Ghost in Latter-day Saint religious contexts, as expressed by the youth.

In interviews and observations every Latter-day Saint youth indicated the importance of the Spirit in their religious contexts and learning. They prayed at the beginning of their classes “to have the Spirit with us” and then at the end, periodically, that they could “keep the Spirit with us.” In seminary, on one occasion, the teacher gave every student a strip of paper with a question on it. Priscilla’s (Latter-day Saint) asked about her favorite passage of scripture. In the following response, note Priscilla’s explanation about how the Holy Ghost helped her develop spiritual knowledge while reading.

Moroni 10 [in the Book of Mormon, is my favorite scripture]. It’s the section where [Moroni’s] talking about gaining a testimony of the Book of Mormon. [Reading verses 4-5]. ‘And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask

¹⁶ The official web site of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (www.lds.org) has a link connected to another Church-sponsored web site with a section devoted to the religious nature of learning entitled “Spirituality and Learning” (<http://www.providentliving.org/content/list/0,11664,1979-1,00.html>). The resources in this section identify the sacred nature of education and the role that the Holy Ghost can play in it.

with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things.’ That verse has really helped me as I’m reading the Book of Mormon so I can gain a testimony of what I’m reading. When I’m done reading I pray about it and try to receive confirmation from the Holy Ghost” (Latter-day Saint, March 27, 2009).

Priscilla’s statement was representative of the place the Holy Ghost played in Latter-day Saint religious contexts as a means of developing spiritual knowledge, or as Priscilla referenced it, testimony. Other youth were not as explicit about stating how the Holy Ghost confirmed truth to them, but as stated previously all of the Latter-day Saint youth indicated that the Spirit was an important part of their religious learning experiences. When the youth believed that the Spirit was present, the religious context became a place apart where Latter-day Saint youth claimed they could learn important lessons about spiritual matters. Priscilla indicated that she actively sought “confirmation from the Holy Ghost” so that she could know that what she had read was true. She also stated that without attending to one’s religious literate practices, by, for example, inviting in the Spirit, one “might not be able to gain a testimony of [scriptural] truth” (Priscilla, Latter-day Saint). Other Latter-day Saint youth also understood the Holy Ghost as a means of developing spiritual knowledge. Paul, for example, stated “The Holy Ghost lets people say that Jesus is the Lord” (Latter-day Saint, March 26, 2009). Another youth said, “[The Holy Ghost] helps me believe things that are hard to believe” (Sophia, Latter-day Saint, February 11, 2009). Analyses of the interviews suggested that when the youth believed that the Spirit was present in religious contexts that they were being “taught by the Spirit.” This helped them know what was “true.” The influence of the Spirit appeared to create a safe space for Latter-day Saint youth to engage in religious literacy learning. As suggested in Priscilla’s extended response,

learning about scripture could happen when individuals stayed close to the scriptures, asked for the Holy Ghost to be with them to testify of truth, and then listened carefully for that “confirmation.”

Indicating the importance of seminary as a protected, spiritual learning space set apart from other spaces, Sophia (Latter-day Saint) stated that seminary was a “really positive way to begin my day . . . before all of the swearing in the [school] hallways.” She said elsewhere that seminary was how she got “kind of . . . a spiritual start to [my] day.” Another Latter-day Saint youth who would attend seminary the following year said that she felt seminary would prepare her to face “the big, bad world of high school” (Samantha). These views of the safe, protected nature of seminary stood in contrast to some of the youth who referred to school “a prison” (Timothy, Latter-day Saint), and “boring [and] monotonous” (Samantha, Latter-day Saint).

For the Latter-day Saint, seminary-attending youth in this study, protected space was created by what they felt was the presence of the Holy Ghost. Youth and adults tried to create religious environments that would allow the Spirit to attend them. When they believed that this occurred, youth felt that they were in a comfortable, safe space where spiritual learning could take place, particularly by way of reading and understanding scripture and spiritual truths of their religious tradition. In this way, the presence of the Holy Ghost motivated youth to read scripture because the youth believed that the Spirit’s influence could build religious knowledge, or testimony. For the Methodist youth, protected space was characterized by the freedom to speak and act without judgment. I turn there now.

“Say whatever you want here”: Motivating Methodist Youth for Discussions

For the Methodist youth, religious contexts were distinct from other contexts, such as school, which one youth described as “a standard process of educating children [that was] not informed by students” (Joshua). Jennifer (Methodist) said that school was “totally brutal.”

Religious contexts were set apart from the profane contexts of school. But just how were the religious contexts different? Jennifer (Methodist) stated that when individuals attended Methodist religious contexts, they came “to this safe and nurturing environment.” That was the idea behind the programs. The feelings of safety that Jennifer and her peers expressed were perhaps influenced by their denomination’s focus on attending to youths’ social and emotional needs and attempting to make them feel accepted.

Ecclesiastical leaders such as the bishop (Latter-day Saint) or youth minister (Methodist) selected the adults who would assist in teaching the youth of their congregations. The adults encouraged youth to engage in discussions around pre-determined topics. Indeed, talk in Methodist religious contexts was one of the most valued literate practices and instructional methods. During MYF, for example, small-group discussions appeared to be aimed at encouraging youth to share their ideas. The following field note excerpt illustrates how important certain types of talk were for the Methodists in this congregation.

As part of the small group discussion about The Parable of the Mustard seed, Mary, the adult leader, reading from prepared notes, asks the six males in her group what they would do to make a significant change in the world, regardless of money or other restrictions. One male says that he would make himself, “Lord of the world.” Another says that he would return things to their “elemental states.” Mary challenges the plausibility of this statement. The youth backs off. Mary quickly says, “No, no, you should be able to say whatever you want here.” The group (including the youth who talked about returning things to their element states) continues its conversation, picking up a new thread about reducing its carbon footprint. A few minutes later, the large group leader calls all of the groups back together and explains that each group will choose a spokesperson to share what their group talked about. . . . The large group

leader reminds them, “There are no right or wrong answers.” He calls on one group to start (Methodist, September 21, 2008).

On two occasions within minutes of each other, the counselors reassured the youth that MYF was a place where their ideas – whatever they were – could be shared without judgment. They went so far as to say the youth could say anything and that what they said was not judged on the basis of right or wrong. These sorts of phrases – “Say whatever you want here,” and “There are no right or wrong answers” – were embedded in the talking that occurred in this Methodist congregation over the course of the study and cohered with this congregation’s cultural values of belongingness. Adults and youth frequently used these phrases before or after questions aimed at soliciting discussions to encourage oral participation in small and large groups. The phrases reinforced the cultural practice of valuing youths’ ideas, interpretations, and experiences. The Methodist youth in this study appeared to recognize this, appearing at ease and very willing to share their thoughts in the company of peers and adults. As one Methodist youth said, this created a space for her that – because she felt safe to talk – was “kind of like a sanctuary” (Jennifer). As indicated in the next section, many of Jennifer’s Methodist peers agreed with her appraisal of religious contexts as sacred, belonging spaces.

“Everyone can say anything”: Motivating Methodist Youth in Protected Space

In an interview with Sarah (Methodist) about her experiences with MYF over several years, she described it as a place where she and others could be free. In this excerpt she compared MYF to religious retreats, or “camps.”

There’s not walls. There’s no, like, lines that shouldn’t be crossed. It’s just everyone can say anything. Everyone’s open to everyone’s own ideas. And I think it’s just a good experience. . . . Like coming back from camp especially, you come from a place where there are no walls to jump over. There’s no restrictions on you. And then you come back

and it's like you're in the real world and you're not allowed to be like that. I mean, you can, but it's not accepted. It's not as appreciated. . . . That freedom is so nice – to not have to like To really not even feel pressured to worry about anything. It's an escape really. You can just be free when you're in youth fellowship, I think.

For Sarah, MYF was a special, social place without walls to limit deep, personal communication. Sarah felt that she and others could say anything to each other and listen to other ideas without judgment. Sarah did not feel pressure in religious contexts to worry about things, stating that MYF was an escape, a place where she could be free. She contrasted this free, safe space with “the real world.” This is particularly interesting because this contrast establishes the sacredness of religious contexts in opposition to the profane spaces of the real world where such openness and freedom are “not allowed,” or at least “not accepted.” For many of the Methodist youth in this study, the “real world” included any space that was not accepting, relaxing, or spiritually edifying. The contrast, by implication, was that religious contexts were something other than the “real world,” or as I argue here, a safe, sacred world where worry and judgment seemed to have been displaced by comfort and peace.

For Melinda (Methodist), MYF was a place where youth could be themselves and say whatever they wanted to say. One reason that the discussions in this youth group appeared to flourish may have been because MYF was safe. That is, Methodist youth may have felt that they were protected from potential ridicule by norms of speech and behavior that made MYF a “safe environment” – a place where one could express her thoughts without worry. Melinda explained:

I want to impress the fact [that] when it comes to the Youth Group, [it] is like a total lifeline to the average teenager. Because where else are you going to be yourself? And you can't really do it with your group of friends [at school] because who knows what

they'll think. Will they still be your friend after they hear whatever crazy thought comes out of your mouth?

Religious contexts appeared to be places where individuals could share their thoughts, believing that friendships did not hang in the balance every time someone opened her mouth. Melinda asked rhetorically, "Where else are you going to be yourself [other than at church]?" Religious contexts appeared to provide some of the youth with a socially supportive and accepting environment where they could be themselves and share their thoughts. This context, in short, provided a space where young people appeared to feel that they could talk, ask questions, express their opinions, and not have to worry about what others thought of them. In this way, protected space may have motivated some of the Methodist youth to engage in literacy, especially through talk, as they attempted to make sense of their experiences in the world. In practice, however, all of the Methodist youth indicated that they could not say or do *anything*. One could not, for example, swear, disrupt "serious discussions" with jokes, say "hateful things," or express opinions that belittled others or contradicted core beliefs. In the next section I present evidence of times when protected space was violated. These violations could limit these young peoples' motivation for literacy.

Violating Protected Space

All of the Methodist youth indicated that they felt that others would respect or at least listen to what they had to say in religious contexts. Notwithstanding this culture of protected space, there were times when individuals violated this space. Melinda (Methodist), for example, offered an interpretation of Jesus' life that breached the boundaries of protected doctrinal space. Her peers guarded against this breach. Also, in the Latter-day Saint seminary, some of the youth ridiculed one of their peers publically, but nobody intervened. These episodes suggest

what can happen to motivation for literacy when individuals no longer feel safe in spaces they believed were protected.

“Jesus was Gay. Don’t say it.” During an interview, I asked Melinda if there were things that people should not say, as a Methodist, during discussions in religious contexts. She related the following experience about a discussion at church in which she offered her views of Jesus’ sexuality. The result, she said, was that “everyone was like, aghast.”

Melinda: We were talking about if there was a possibility if there was a Mary Magdalene. . . . They’re [members of her small group] like, “We don’t know.” I’m my opinion, if he was a man, like we’re supposedly saying, he had someone. It doesn’t matter. He *was a man*. If he was actually a man and not like this godly figure like la-de, da-de, da. He was a man growing up. He was a teenage boy. I can guarantee he had a girlfriend at some point. Like, you know what I mean, everyone has a girlfriend at some point. They have to. And so, they were like, “I can’t believe you sit here and like, how dare you!” And they were like, “Oh, my God. I can’t believe you would say something like that.” And I was like, “He was a human being. That is a normal human act. If he was a mature human being it’s like he would be having sex if he was a man, so, yeah, I’m sure he was having sex. Even if he was gay I’m sure he was having sex.” And that, whoa! Whoa! That was the wrong thing to say [Laugh]. [Others responded to Melinda, saying], “I can’t believe you would say, ‘Oh, he was having sex. Oh, yah, yah, yah.’” And I was just like, “If he was a man, I’m sure he was having sex. Even if it’s like you don’t think it was with a woman, it must have been with a man. Like, he was having sex! He *was*.

He had to have some relation. . . . And they're like, "Oh, my gosh! I can't believe you would say that!" I'm like, "Well, when you travel around with a big group of men, like, you never. . . . That thought never even crossed your mind?" And they were like, "Whatever." I was like, "I thought this was Greenview City. Like, you know, you've got to be open-minded. I was just saying my opinion, you know. He traveled around with a big group of men, like what do you think they did."

ER: And that didn't go over well . . . ?

Melinda: Jesus was gay. Don't say it.

Melinda's experience suggests that she could not say *anything* in religious contexts.

Melinda's suggestion that Jesus had sexual relations with women and men was not accepted by her peers as a legitimate topic of conversation or interpretation of Jesus' life. The protected space had been violated. Melinda's suggestions appeared to conflict too strongly with her peers' deeply held beliefs about Jesus, even in such an "open-minded" place as Greenview City, which she used as a possible justification for her views. Melinda may have been motivated to engage with this and other discussions because she *did* feel free to share her thoughts on the topic; that is, because she believed that she was in a protected space that experience had taught her valued individual's thoughts. However, over time, through experiences such as this, she may have learned that this freedom to speak was bounded. She prefaced this episode by saying "I've learned over the years – it's not like I knew in the beginning. . . . I learned that I shouldn't say things like this." One way that she learned this may have been through her peers' responses. They appeared to defend the doctrinal space from what they may have seen as an attack, an attempt to violate the protected space of their beliefs about Jesus. Notice their responses, as expressed by Melinda:

- “I can’t believe you sit here and like, how dare you!”
- “Oh, my God. I can’t believe you would say something like that.”
- “I can’t believe you would say, ‘Oh, he was having sex. Oh, yah, yah, yah.’”
- “Oh, my gosh! I can’t believe you would say that!”
- “Whatever.”

These expressions by Melinda’s peers suggest that in this episode Melinda ran up against one of the boundaries of the cultural practice of being free to speak one’s mind during discussions in religious contexts. Open-mindedness and free-speaking had their limits in this Methodist religious context. Although qualities of religious contexts appeared to motivate youth to engage in discussions, when the protected space was violated, motivation appeared to fade. For Melinda’s part, after this discussion she indicated that she felt outside of the group. Also, she was careful about what she said, at least for a time, in this and other religious contexts. More often, when motivation faded, conversations lagged, youth fidgeted in their seats, and the youth leaders often fumbled for a path to follow. Sometimes Methodist leaders even blamed the youth for lack of motivation, saying things like, “You must be tired today” (Methodist, September 28, 2008). These sorts of violations of protected space appeared to be, for many Methodist youth, a sobering reminder of what protected space must be protected from.

The Electric Light. The following episode illustrates how violations of protected space in one Latter-day Saint seminary class could influence motivation for engagement in learning. One morning one young man volunteered to help the teacher with the lesson. In private, the teacher instructed him to try to describe an electric light to his peers, who were supposed to pretend that they lived 500 years in the past, and knew nothing of electricity. As he explained an electric light his peers began asking a lot of question, one right after another. Class members began laughing when the young man stumbled over his words or said something that contradicted

what he had already said. This lasted for about three minutes, at which time the teacher asked the students to turn to John 11 in their Bibles. The young man returned to his seat, folded his arms, and put his head in his arms (Latter-day Saint, December 1, 2008).

In this episode, the youth in class badgered the young man publically as he tried to do his part in the lesson. When the young man returned to his desk his actions suggested that he was disengaged from his peers, the teacher, and the lesson. He kept his head on his desk for most of the class and refused to the Bible that was in front of him, follow along with others as they read, and talk to the teacher or his peers. Although striking, this episode was not without precedent. I had witnessed the youth in this group peppering this same young man with comments on at least one other occasion.

The taunting of this young man by his peers stunned me. I had never seen anything quite like this in the time that I had known these youth informally or as part of this study. This was one occasion in which my identification with the Latter-day Saint youth influenced data collection and analysis. I immediately approached the teacher after class to talk about what happened. I felt embarrassed for the young man, and by his peers' actions. Also, as a Latter-day Saint I knew that this behavior was contrary to the words of the then president of the Church, Gordon B. Hinckley, who stated that friendship within the Church was important for helping individuals develop in their faith (Hinckley, 1997, 2003, 2006). Hinckley's words were repeated often by the leadership of the Church (Holland, 2007; Jolley, 2003; Nelson, 2004; Oaks, 2003) and within the local congregation in which I was a member. I was therefore, equally stunned by how the teacher seemed to dismiss, even justify, the episode by referring to the young man's social awkwardness, troubling family situation, and "distracting" comments. After several questions aimed at understanding why something like this could occur in a religious (protected) context and how the teacher planned to address it, I was not sure that this young man's peers

or his teacher would help seminary truly be a protected space for him. Alex (Methodist) may have captured the heart of this experience when he stated, “If someone feels violated . . . then it makes them feel uncomfortable and then they can’t participate.”

In these short episodes, as at other times, protected space broke down. That which may be termed sacred became profane, or no longer distinguishable from the sacred, as students spoke and acted in ways that, for the Latter-day Saints may have driven away the comforting influence of the Spirit, and for the Methodist may have made it unsafe to speak freely. These experiences may have conjured up images of the “big, bad world of high school” (Samantha, Latter-day Saint). The young man in the Latter-day Saint seminary class did not have to go school to experience this world. He was living it, in seminary. These episodes also demonstrate that when protected space loses its emotional (and spiritual) security students like this young man and Melinda may lose their motivation for literate activities such as reading and discussing. Although the Methodist youth felt like they could say anything in this protected space and Latter-day Saint youth tried to have the Spirit with them in seminary, in practice only those who most closely demonstrated correct cultural practices felt safe and welcome.

Personal Connections and their Role in Motivation for Literacy

Personal connections refer to the social ties among individuals in religious contexts. Religious contexts were places characterized by many of the youth as socially cohesive. “You meet the people that you’re going to be friends with for the rest of your life,” said Melinda (Methodist). Often, the social context was the key motivation for Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth to attend religious services and for Methodist youth to engage in literate practices while there. Developing and maintaining strong connections with others in religious contexts often appeared to be an important issue with many of these youth who characterized their religious

contexts as spiritually and emotionally strong, and nurturing.¹⁷ Specifically, social connections made youth feel close to their peers, which motivated them to share their thoughts and experiences. Developing strong bonds within communities of believers has historical roots for Latter-day Saints and Methodists. From the beginning, John Wesley encouraged close-knit groups of people to worship together to promote spiritual and social unity (Burton, 2008). Today, Methodists use the word “connectionalism” to describe “the organized system of communication and accountability [which consists of a] system of classes, societies, and annual conferences” (“Structure and organization,” n.d., para.2) designed to build and strengthen communities (Cracknell and White, 2005).

Latter-day Saints also have a history of developing and maintaining close associations among their members through weekly church attendance and regular home visits as part of the Home Teaching and Visiting Teaching programs.¹⁸ Moreover, at times in their history when they were accosted by mobs, Latter-day Saints had to depend on the strength of their associations with other members for their very survival (Arrington and Britton, 1992).¹⁹ Latter-day Saints and Methodists have a history of creating strong, connected groups of people. The youth in this study may have been influenced by the legacy of their religious traditions to promote unity among their peers, and for the Methodist youth, this may have been one factor motivating them to engage in literate practices, particularly talk. For the Latter-day Saint youth, I could discern no

¹⁷ This notion echoes Durkheim’s (1912) conceptualization of religion as a source of identification and social solidarity. Durkheim (1912) argued that religion reinforced moral and social norms within a society as it drew people together physically (in religious spaces) and mentally (through religious rites and practices). In this study, I observed that the social connections youth developed in religious contexts may have served as a motivation for literacy.

¹⁸ Home Teaching is a Church-sponsored program in which two men, as companions, visit assigned families in a ward at least once each month. Their responsibility is to “to encourage and inspire every member to discharge his duty [to his family and the Church]” (Benson, 1987). Visiting Teaching is a similar program in which two women, as companions, visit assigned women in a ward at least once a month. Home and Visiting Teaching are “vital” programs in the Mormon Church (Benson, 1987; see Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 1992).

¹⁹ Regarding Mormonism and cohesion, Jorgensen (2009) stated that the “religious beliefs and practices differentiated the Saints from other Americans, serving as a way for the Latter-day Saints to identify themselves as socially different. These differences, in turn, provide the Saints with the grounds for developing very cohesive, self-sufficient communities” (p.335).

pattern related to how social connections in religious contexts motivated them for religious literacy, although I found evidence to support strong social connections, in religious contexts, with religious peers.²⁰ Before identifying the role of social connections in religious literacy for Methodist youth, I identify the fundamental principle guiding interactions in both religious denominations

“Everyone is God’s children”: The Fundamental Principle of Interaction

Many of the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth often compared the social nature of their relationships with individuals in religious contexts to a tightly knit family of concerned parents and siblings. Speaking about Latter-day Saints, Dean (2010) stated that “congregations function as extended families” (p.55). It appeared that this may have been the case for this Latter-day Saint congregation, and this Methodist congregation as well. One Methodist youth, for example, said, “Youth group served as a sort of second family for me. I always knew I was surrounded by some of the nicest, kindest, and warmest people I’ll ever meet” (First United Methodist Church of Greenview City website). This youth identified some of qualities she found in the people she associated with in religious contexts. She referred to them as her “second family.” Jonah (Latter-day Saint), referring to his male friends from church, said that they were “like brothers that all get along.” These family metaphors represent many of the family metaphors the youth from both denominations provided when talking about the individuals in their religious congregations. These metaphors illustrated the strong social bonds that existed in religious contexts, which echoed a key doctrine of both denominations. Although the theological details of individuals’ relationship with God differ among Latter-day Saints and Methodists, both agree that humans have a parent-child relationship with God; namely, that God is the creator

²⁰ All of the Latter-day Saint youth in the study reported that one of the draws of religious service attendance was social connections, but I found no evidence suggesting that these connections with their peers motivated the youth to engage in literate practices.

and people are the creations. And as God's creations, all people are, in a sense, siblings. This doctrine appeared to influence the way Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth conceptualized relationships with others insofar as the social bonds that individuals sought to maintain and strengthen were grounded in an understanding of one's relationship with God. In this way, social relationships were imbued with the sacred. As Melinda (Methodist) put it:

[MYF] is like flying with a bunch of kids who are really all very weird. And they're allowed to be weird when they're there. And they can be what they want to be. And people respect them for that and make it work because everyone is God's children.

That's kind of the unspoken rule of how everyone is accepted.

Melinda stated that being God's children demanded mutual respect, acceptance, and making relationships work. Understanding one's relationship with God, then, may have helped one understand her relationships with others. Specifically, Melinda indicated that she had a social responsibility toward others because all people were God's children – and families accept each other even if they are filled with “a bunch of kids who are really all very weird.” As Melinda stated “the unspoken rule” that appeared to guide relationships was the shared understanding that “everyone is God's children.” I refer to this as the fundamental principle of interaction because it presented itself often during the study and it appeared to guide many of the youths' relationships with others.

One's relationship with God appeared to be a key part of weekly worship services for both denominations. Each Sunday, for example, the Methodists and Latter-day Saints in this study prayed to God and invoked God's will in their religious ordinances, and their lives.

Moreover, each Sunday the female Latter-day Saint youth orally recited the Young Women theme that identified particular beliefs about their relationship with God and how they would try to live their lives. The first line declared their relationship with God. It stated, “We are

daughters of our Heavenly Father, who loves us, and we love Him.” In the room where the female Latter-day Saint youth met for their meetings, the statement over the chalkboard in the front of the room reminded them: “We are daughters of our Heavenly Father.”

For both of these congregations, understanding oneself as a child of God appeared to mean that individuals had the responsibility to make others feel accepted; that is, to make them feel like “it’s okay being me” and “there is nothing wrong with me” when they are in the company of their religious “family” (Jennifer, Methodist). The publication *For the Strength of Youth*, referenced by many Latter-day Saint youth in this study, stated that youth were to “Make [others] feel welcome and wanted” (p.12). Because “God made [us],” Kate (Methodist) said, if we fail to “love others for who they are” and make them feel safe and accepted, then we are “disrespecting God in [a] sense.” Although this principle of interaction did not appear to be universally followed by the youth in both congregations, it appeared to guide many of their interactions insofar as youth frequently described their personal relationships in religious contexts in familial terms, using words like “bonding,” and “love.” Sarah (Methodist), for example, said that in religious contexts “there’s always like an expression of the bond between you.” That bond may have reflected the sacred nature of the relationships that could form in religious contexts. These relationships appeared to be distinct from other relationships youth formed, at, for example, school where one youth described his peers as “rude,” “mean,” and “not accept[ing]” (Alex, Methodist).

“A good bonding experience”: Social Relations among Methodist Youth

During an interview Jennifer (Methodist) talked about being surrounded by “people who care” at church. She said that in religious contexts you get to interact, creating “super secure” relationships with “a group of people who you trust and care about.” These close relations appeared to exist among the youth from both denominations who were involved in this study.

Moreover, these strong social relationships appeared to be developed and reinforced in religious contexts, often through talk. Discussions, analyses suggest, lead to greater feelings of personal connectivity among the Methodist youth, which then may have motivated them to participate more in discussions, making the discussions richer and more meaningful for the youth personally. All of the Methodist youth participating in this study indicated the importance of the relationship between social connections and discussions in religious contexts. The data included in this section are exemplars. Alex (Methodist), for example, stated that discussions developed the already strong social relationships by allowing individuals greater insight into “different people’s viewpoints and kind of realizing what they think. It kind of helps you understand a person, just a lot better.” Jennifer (Methodist) extended this, stating that discussions can not only create strong(er) peer-to-peer bonds, but that they could even “open up the doors between the older and younger generations.” Specifically, Jennifer suggested that these intergenerational conversations could be important because they could help “not have younger people feel [like] older people are crazy.” Although somewhat flippant in her response, Jennifer was addressing a very real issue in her congregation, which was trying to offset the departure of aging congregants by attracting younger members. It remains to be seen if developing strong social connections and discussions could help with this.

In an interview Sarah (Methodist) described an experience she had with her peers from church. In her description, Sarah indicated the importance of social connections and talk:

There was one night; it was really cool. We had a sleepover thing with all of us at one of the leader’s houses at the church who works with the youth a lot. And we did this thing where our pastor came with us and she had this bag of little rocks that had a word on them and we all . . . went around and described the word. And mine was *encouragement* and it was just a really good experience. . . . I talked about how life is

kind of like running around a track, during a meet because like a track is round, right? And so, I talked about how, like the first lap and the last quarter of the 400 you have the crowd cheering you on, you know. There are people there, right? Like for you. Watching you run. Then there's always that back corner of the track where there isn't usually anyone cheering on people. And I just talked about how there are going to be times in your life where you're not going to have that cheering on and you still have to keep going and you still have to keep going. And you have to not only be encouraged by other people that accept that, but have to encourage yourself to move forward. So, that was probably one of my favorite things, just listening to everyone's description of different words.

In this example, talk was situated outside of the church, in a religious leader's home, with a number of Methodist youth. Sarah described this experience as "listening to everyone's description of different words." Although it may have been grounded in a sharing of ideas through talk, I argue that there was more to it than that. Sarah's explanation of what she said about encouragement was not without its social influences and implications. Specifically, the social and cultural practices of engaging in discussions may have actually motivated Sarah for religious literacy. That Sarah could talk about concepts such as encouragement in this religious context with her religious peers is important. The close personal connections Sarah appeared to share with her religious peers may have influenced her willingness to engage in these conversations. And once engaged in these conversations, by Sarah's recounting, the relationship among Sarah and her peers appeared to develop. Sarah indicated that this experience helped her to understand her friends better and develop stronger relationships with them. She called this social event "really bonding; a good bonding experience," and "one of my favorite things."

This group conversation may have been one cultural manifestation of “connectionalism” among this Methodist congregation’s young people.

By engaging in conversations among like-minded religious peers, Sarah appeared to draw closer to them, which I argue may have encouraged her to continue engaging in conversations about religious issues. Observational data support Sarah’s frequent oral engagement in religious contexts with her peers. Every lesson that I observed in which Sarah was present, she contributed to the conversation. She appeared to enjoy talking about religious issues and interacting with her peers. These strong, personal relationships may have motivated her to engage in discussions in religious contexts. For Alex (Methodist), these sorts of deeply bonding, social experiences through talk were “important [because] they brought us together – brought the whole MYF together and made us a group of really close-knit people.” Samantha (Latter-day Saint) also used the phrase “close-knit” to describe the relationship of the youth in her Sunday worship service classes. I asked her how this influenced her. She said:

It kind of makes me feel I don’t have to contribute, but if I do, it will be fine. And people won’t question what I’m saying. Since I’m with people that have things in common with me. . . . I know if I ask a question it won’t seem out of the blue because it might come from similarities I have with them.

Samantha stated that this “small and close-knit” community influenced her willingness to contribute to the class. In this way, she was much like the Methodist youth. Samantha stated that she felt at ease about offering her ideas and about her peers’ responses to her contributions perhaps *because* she had a certain connection with them. The similarities that they shared and the bonds between them appeared to make Samantha more willing to engage in literacy practices by way of asking and answering questions and sharing experiences; none of

which she felt she *had* to do. In this regard, Samantha may have been an outlier, more closely associated with the Methodist youth than the Latter-day Saint youth.

Melinda (Methodist) also addressed the relationship between social connections and discussions, but she added another dimension – learning. I asked her if discussions in church were important or not important to her. She said that when she was younger discussions helped her learn more about “that cute boy.” Other than that, she indicated, she did not get much out of them. But when she got older discussions became “very important. They are what made me start understanding my religion – my beliefs – more than anything else.” She continued, being even more explicit about how discussions helped her learn. Melinda said, “I started really listening to what people were saying; that really helps me learn the most – hearing other people.” It is important that Melinda characterized the discussions in her Methodist congregation as “what people were saying” and not simply as talk. This move on her part may have indicated the clear – and powerful – social aspect of discussions for Melinda, who was finally “hearing other people,” not just words. As we continued our interview I asked Melinda what was the purpose of discussions in her congregation. Her response further illustrated the importance of the relationship between social connections and talk. She said the purpose of discussions was “to communicate, to try and bring you closer to God – to bring you closer to people.” She said that discussions created a “safe place” and “they make you feel comfortable.” As she concluded her thoughts, Melinda said that a discussion “is whatever you want to make it.” It could be a way to learn about “that cute boy,” or a discussion could help one “understand my religion,” or listen “to what people were saying.” For Melinda, and all of the Methodist youth in this study, social connections appeared to motivate for religious discussions, which, in turn, strengthened social relationships.

Clearly, talking in religious contexts, about religious issues, was an important literate practice for the youth in this Methodist congregation who participated in the study. Religious discussions appeared to be closely connected to the personal relationships shared among the youth. Specifically, the strong social relationships may have motivated the Methodist youth to engage in discussions because one of the things these discussions appeared to do was strengthen the important relationships among the youth. Analyses of observational and interview data suggest that the Methodist youth appeared to be eager to share their thoughts about issues with their peers. These sorts of interactions may have made Methodist youth in this study feel comfortable engaging in conversations in religious contexts with religious peers. In an echo of the fundamental principle guiding interaction and as evidence of the sacred nature of their relationships, Kate (Methodist) connected the strong social bonds that the Methodist youth had for each other to the love that she believed that Jesus has for them. She said, “We all . . . love . . . each other in the same way that Jesus . . . love[d] us.” As I have argued in this section, these strong social connections among the Methodist youth may have motivated them to engage in religious discussions.

In the final section of this chapter, I identify the third contextual element that motivated youth for literacy. It is closely aligned with the textual motivation identified in Chapter Seven as learning and applying.

Learning and its Role in Motivation for Literacy

Another aspect of contexts that appeared to motivate Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth for literacy was the educative quality of the religious environment. As one youth reported, religious services were “a place to learn. [Learning in church] is *really* learning” (Sarah, Methodist). Youth from both denominations appeared to be motivated in religious contexts to read and/or discuss religious doctrine because they wanted to learn more about their religious

beliefs and practices. Analyses of interviews suggest that every youth indicated this. Learning, then, may have motivated the youth for literacy, but learning had a distinct cultural character. Learning for both denominations was not just about hearing or reading particular principles, it was also about doing. That is, in both denominations there appeared to be a strong cultural emphasis on individuals *living* what they knew in order for learning to be efficacious. As with learning, every youth in this study talked about living what they learned, or “applying principles,” or “living our standards.” Therefore, for the youth, learning appeared to include understanding doctrines and principles, and the cultural practice of applying them. In this way, the educative quality of religious contexts (which provided opportunities to learn) may have motivated Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth to participate in religious literate practices.

Here is an instance in which my experiences within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may have influenced my interpretation of the data. During the course of this study I had responsibility in the Church to train 14 early morning seminary teachers. The training was on-going throughout the year. As part of the training I visited the teachers’ classrooms, conducted monthly training meetings, and provided them with weekly ideas for improving their instruction. The notion of creating an instructional context in which youth could learn and apply what they learned resonated with the training that I provided for the seminary teachers. That is to say, within my own religious instructional responsibilities the findings of youth being motivated in contexts in which they could learn and apply what they learned made sense. I may have, therefore, been more willing to accept this interpretation of the data, and may not have interrogated the youths’ words or experiences as much as I could have.

“I base the way I live on the teachings of my religion”: Knowing and Applying Religion.

In religious contexts youth from both denominations heard, read, and talked about beliefs and practices that were deeply important to them. Opportunities to learn more about

these beliefs and practices may have been motivating because this knowledge provided the youth with a more sure foundation for how to live their lives; as Joshua (Methodist) said, “You have to not only express your faith through words, but also through actions.” In order for youth to express their faith through words and actions, they had to know their faiths and the cultural practices surrounding them. Literacy helped them do that. The opportunity to apply religion to life appeared to motivate youth from both congregations to read, talk, think, and in other ways make sense of religious elements. In this way, knowing and applying appeared to be integrally linked as a motivational element for literacy in religious contexts.

Data analyses suggest that Methodist and Latter-day Saint youth stated that they were committed to knowing about and living their chosen religion. Religious learning did not appear to be simply a hollow academic exercise – information to be memorized and forgotten. For youth from both denominations, religious learning appeared to carry immense personal weight. Learning and applying religious beliefs and practices appeared to motivate Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth for literacy in similar ways. The following individual responses are exemplars of the motivational quality of learning and applying.

Latter-day Saint Youth. Priscilla (Latter-day Saint), for example, may have been motivated to read scripture and engage in other literate practices such as discussions so that she could have “a solid understanding of what it is that I believe in.” The knowledge gained through literate practices appeared to be important to her because of the social practice of applying what she learned. That is, knowledge gained meaning for Priscilla and her peers because of what it did to them and how it influenced their daily lives as Christian youth. Paul (Latter-day Saint) agreed. He said that his religious beliefs and practices played “a really big role in, you know, what I do.” He elaborated, stating that they influenced “your daily activities in that you’re always thinking, ‘Is this the right thing to do?’” As with Priscilla, what Paul knew about his

religious beliefs and practices may have influenced what he did, or tried to do, every day. Priscilla was clear about this too. She stated, “I base the way I live on the teachings of my religion.” Priscilla appeared to structure her life to coincide with her religious tradition’s teachings and expectations. For example, Priscilla and her mother indicated that Priscilla studied scripture regularly. I also observed her regularly attending seminary and Sunday worship services, living the Church’s standards of modesty in her dress and speech (in religious contexts), and observing the code of health known as the Word of Wisdom (again, in religious contexts). In many ways, the younger youth may have looked to – or read – Priscilla as a model for how one’s life could reflect the teachings of their faith.

Explaining the connection between knowing and applying, Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) put it simply when he said, “If I don’t understand [my religion], then I shouldn’t be part of that religion. . . . If you are going to do something, then you should do it right.” Doing it right meant learning about his religion, and living it. Jonathan elaborated on and demonstrated this during a talk in front of a congregation of about 250 people. He spoke about preparing now for his two-year, full-time missionary service in about six years. In the talk he focused on learning and applying religious beliefs through speaking, reading, and writing. Jonathan said that he could prepare to be a good missionary by praying, studying his scriptures, and writing in his journal. Indeed, his motivation for engaging in these literate practices (including, perhaps this talk) may have been that they would help him learn about his religion, so that he could live its principles by being, for example, a good missionary. Jonathan appeared to believe that he could not be a missionary, or the missionary he wanted to be, without engaging in the effortful, long-term literate practices that he identified. For Jonathan, knowing and living his particular beliefs and practices was doing things “right,” which may have been strong cultural motivations for literacy learning.

Paul (Latter-day Saint) indicated the relationship between learning in religious contexts and applying what he learned when he stated that “at church you kind of go to learn more about the gospel and more about the scriptures, and things that we should be doing.” Gaining knowledge in religious contexts appeared to be more than simply learning information. Paul understood that what he learned in religious contexts “should” influence his actions. And as indicated previously (“you’re always thinking, ‘Is this the right thing to do?’”), they appeared to do just that. Paul elaborated on this concept of knowing and applying when he said that in religious contexts he and his peers learn “to be just good people in general.” Learning “to be just good people” suggests that one must act in certain ways, which for Paul may have been based on what one had learned about doing so in religious contexts. Vincent appeared to agree. He said that being a Latter-day Saint youth meant attending “church service[s] fairly regularly and upkeeping those standards and beliefs.” As with Paul, Vincent connected religious contexts, expectations of conduct, and “doing” or “upkeeping those standards and beliefs.” Because these Latter-day Saint youths’ religious traditions, cultures, and practices appeared to be so important to them, learning and applying these principles and practices were critical if the youth wanted to maintain and develop knowledge and testimony of their faith. Therefore, religious contexts that could help them learn and apply these beliefs and practices appeared to motivate these Latter-day Saint youth to engage with learning.

Methodist Youth. For Sarah (Methodist), learning about and applying her religion was also very valuable: “I always feel like I’m *actually* learning something, or taking [in] something new [at church].” I asked her more about this. Sarah explained that in religious contexts what she learned was applicable to her life:

I feel like I'm actually learning because it's applicable. You know, we're obviously learning things that we're intended to live by, or we're intended to think about how we can follow different concepts or the ideas ourselves and how we live.

Sarah appeared to have understood that her cultural responsibility was to figure out how she could incorporate ideas or concepts into her life. In part, what she learned in religious contexts may have been important because it *was* applicable. Analyses of data suggest that Sarah took seriously the responsibility she believed she had to apply to her life what she was learning in religious contexts. And she expended great effort to do so, thinking deeply about how to live her religion. She said that "you can take and really always have [what you've learned] in your pocket; always have to think about or to use." Sarah may have used *always* intentionally to identify not only the importance of applying religious knowledge, but its permanency, in comparison to other types of learning. She stated:

I think just instead of just taking in information, you know, to remember, you know and have like [for] a set time – I need to know this for this long. [Religious learning] is something you can take in and you know forever. I think that's really like where the difference is I'd have to say. It's a lifelong thing, what we learn in youth group or Sol Café.²¹

Religious learning, Sarah claimed, was lifelong. "That's . . . the difference," she said. Sarah indicated a belief that the principles she learned in religious contexts could influence her life for as long as she lived. In this way, the learning that took place in religious contexts was distinct from the learning that took place in, for example, school where one could cram for a test, and then ostensibly forget what one learned. But Sarah was not learning religious material for an

²¹ Sol Café was the name of the Methodist's Sunday school program in which youth selected semester long courses of study to attend with their peers each Sunday morning. Classes were taught by adult Methodist members of the congregation.

exam in a few weeks. She was not cramming for a test. Data analyses suggest that Sarah may have felt that the principles she was learning were somehow tested; that they had a proven and efficacious nature that she could tap into by living them. Indeed, application was part of the Methodist culture. It was the instructional *raison d'être*. Knowing was an important step, but living appeared to be the goal.

The following field note excerpt recounts a conversation I had with Stanley (Methodist, adult) about applying religious instruction. It indicates how important it was for Methodist adults to help youth understand and apply the principles of their faith. In this way, this field note illustrates the cultural character of learning in this Methodist tradition.

I mentioned to Stanley that I noticed that last week he had brought together pop culture through *The Lord of the Rings* and the scriptures and sought to apply biblical teachings to the youths' lives. I asked him if this was common. He said that it was and that he – and others – sought to create a “lifestyle” for the youth wherein the scriptures were no longer “old, dusty words.” He didn't want the youth to take the scriptures at face value; rather, he wanted them to be able to understand what the Bible and its teachings might have for them and their lives and how it might help them out (Methodist, September 28, 2008).

Aiming to develop what might be called a “lifestyle of application,” Stanley and other Methodist adults sought to make religious instruction meaningful to the Methodist youth. One way they attempted to do this was to connect it to popular culture, such as movies and books. In several MYF programs the adult counselors presented programs that brought together themes in *The Lord of the Rings* and the Bible, such as the “power of the one.” In this program, youth watched and discussed a clip from *The Lord of the Rings* in which Frodo stands up as his colleagues argue and states that he, a hobbit, will take the responsibility for destroying the Ring of Power. In this

same program the youth also read and discussed the Parable of the Mustard Seed from the New Testament (Mark 4:30-32), focusing on the potential the mustard seed (a small seed) had within it to become a great herb. The purpose, as I interpreted it, was to drive home the point: even if you are small, and alone, you can still make a difference.²²

Kate (Methodist) talked about being the person she wanted to be by attending church and living her life in a certain way. She said, “I kind of live out what Jesus was, like his ideas about stuff as much as possible in my life. . . . I can accomplish that by going to church.” Kate expounded on this, explaining in greater detail that a critical aspect of church attendance involved the literate practices of reading and talking about the Bible and what it teaches about Jesus. This, Kate said, “is something that you can apply to your life.” For Kate, attending church and reading and discussing the Bible could help her live her life as she believed Jesus would. Living like this appeared to be important for Kate, who, on another occasion stated simply, “I love God. I’ll just put that out there. I want to find out what He wants for my life.” Among her Methodist peers participating in this study, Kate had a reputation as an exemplary young woman that had, in many ways, become a model of Methodist cultural practices and commitments. Her religious peers indicated that they valued her public prayers (Methodist, February 15, 2009), her insights during discussions (Methodist, December 7, 2008) and her ability to keep them on the right track (Methodist, February 1, 2009). Kate attributed her ability to live her life as Jesus would, at least partially, to attending church and engaging in the literate practices of reading and discussing. This suggests that the right religious environment – where one learned, for example, about Jesus – could help Kate live her life in accordance with her understanding of God’s will. In this way, Kate may have been motivated to learn and apply

²² In the Latter-day Saint seminary, the teacher engaged in a similar practice by using a clip from *Kung-Fu Panda*, a recent animated film about a panda who learns kung-fu. The clip was intentionally used to help the youth understand the “Law of the Harvest,” which the teacher stated, was that “You harvest what you plant, or you reap what you sow.” After the clip they read Galatians 5:7-10 and the teacher asked, “How does the Law of the Harvest apply to you?” He asked for examples from the youths’ lives (Latter-day Saint, April 3, 2009).

principles and literate practices in religious contexts so that she could “live out” Jesus’ ideas in her own life. Kate demonstrated that religious contexts can motivate her for literacy learning when the contexts helped her learn and apply the principles that were important to her.

In summary, because religion was so important to Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth, opportunities to learn about their beliefs and practices may have motivated them to read about their beliefs, engage in conversations about their beliefs, think about them, and seek how they might live them. For the youth in both congregations, learning was not simply knowing; rather, learning appeared to include living what one knew.²³ This important cultural practice of application of principles added a critical layer to learning. In Sarah words, application was “the purpose [of instruction].”

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I identified and provided evidence for three characteristics of religious contexts that appeared to motivate Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth for literacy. The protected, connected, and educative qualities of religious contexts that motivated Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth for literacy, although distinct, were not completely separated. In theory and practice they overlapped. For example, a protected space where youth felt safe engaging with their peers and with whom they had strong, personal connections was likely to be an environment conducive to learning about issues and topics that were important to youth. Together, these qualities – as understood and practiced within distinct Latter-day Saint or Methodist cultural space – appeared likely to motivate youth to engage in literate practices. Furthermore, these qualities created a distinct literacy learning environment set apart from other learning environments, such as school. As such, these religious cultural spaces may be

²³ However, all of the youth may not have lived their lives in accordance with their religious beliefs and practices all of the time. The data gathered for this study cannot confirm how youth lived outside of religious contexts because this dissertation only focused on youths’ motivations for literacy in religious contexts. Perhaps this is an area for further study.

characterized as sacred spaces because, as Otto (1917) argued, they exhibited qualities that many of the youth may not have found in their everyday experiences. In the next chapter I continue the focus on the youths' religious literate practices by presenting the youths' actual religious literate practices and how they learned them in religious contexts.

Chapter 6

The Literate Practices of Religious Youth

With regard to literacy, the youth demonstrated that being literate meant being able to use various literate practices to act appropriately, in a given context. Literacies, therefore, gave youth access to particular communities, in this case, communities of fellow Christians. Scripture was a vital element in the youths' literate practices. Many of their literacies and religious instruction revolved around scripture. Many of them read it, talked about it, and sought to live by it. Knowing texts and what to do with them was important for knowing how to be a member of a particular religious tradition and culture. For many of the youth in this study, reading scripture was one of the most socially and culturally valuable literate practices in which they could engage, but reading scripture was not without its challenges. In addition to scripture reading, the youth also engaged in a number of other literate practices such as talking and writing. In this chapter I explore the youths' conceptions of scripture and their literate practices in order to address one of the questions guiding this study: What were these youths' religious literate practices?

Youths' Conception of Scripture

Scripture appeared to be a foundational element in most of the youths' lives. Many of them read scripture every day, some a few times each week, and others mostly at church, but regardless of the frequency of their scripture reading, overall most of the youth stated that they valued scripture as a critical part of their social and cultural religious literacy practices. However, scripture appeared to be difficult for many of the youth to read because of (a) the antiquated,

confusing language, and (b) the way it contradicted itself and sometimes the youths' own beliefs, values, and practices. In this section I explore these two challenges with scripture to provide a richer portrait of the youths' conceptions of scripture that will inform the subsequent findings about their literate practices.

"It's this ultimate thing in the Christian religion": The Foundational Nature of Sacred Texts

The youth in this study defined sacred texts in various ways within and across denominations. Most of the Methodists, for example, indicated that the Bible was sacred because of its historical longevity and because of how it functioned in their lives. Two Methodist youth indicated that talk was a sacred text. For Latter-day Saint youth, scripture was also sacred because of how it functioned socially and culturally in their lives as children who had grown up reading it, and as older youth by how it made them feel and the blessings they received from reading it. The Bible was the most common scripture referred to by Methodist youth. Latter-day Saint youth included other scripture in addition to the Bible: the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Many of the Latter-day Saint youth called these four texts "the standard works" of their religion. To better understand youths' conceptions of sacred texts, I asked them about profane texts, or texts that they found offensive.²⁴

Latter-day Saints' Profane Texts. Profane texts for six of the Latter-day Saint youth appeared to be those texts that influenced them to conduct themselves in ways contrary to their religious/cultural beliefs and practices. Profane texts included those texts that had "bad morals," or "low standards." Morals or standards were general phrases for the Latter-day Saint youths' notion of proper conduct. Most of the Latter-day Saint youth spoke in the interviews

²⁴ Initially, I asked youth about texts that they believed were profane, but they did not seem to understand what I was talking about. I, therefore, asked them about texts that they found offensive. They appeared to understand this, but I am not convinced that *offensive* captures the appropriate notion of *profane* as that which is set apart from the sacred. In retrospect, I could have rephrased my question to ask the youth, not about offensive texts, but perhaps about *non-sacred texts*. This would have been more consistent with the theoretical conceptualization of the sacred offered by Durkheim (1912), Otto (1917), and Eliade (1957).

about their standards. These included attending church, reading scripture, using “clean language,” and praying, but they also indicated a number of behaviors that were not consistent with their standards, such as smoking, taking drugs, drinking alcohol, and wearing immodest clothing. These they tried to avoid. As such, texts that included these behaviors were profane, or contrary to their deeply held religious beliefs, values, and practices. On one occasion I asked Sophia (Latter-day Saint) what it meant to practice her religion. In the following excerpt notice her explanation of how she kept her environment clean by eliminating the “bad.” Her response appeared to relate to her peers’ notion of profane texts as those texts that influenced them to conduct themselves in opposition to their religious/cultural beliefs, values, and practices.

Sophia: I don’t watch bad movies. I try and keep my environment clean around me.

ER: What do you mean when you say that you keep your environment clean?

Sophia: I try not to let bad things enter the spaces around me. Like, I don’t want to have bad influences coming in.

ER: How do you do that?

Sophia: I don’t watch bad television. I tend not to watch television really. And movies, I’m really careful about what I watch.

Sophia’s explanation of keeping her environment clean by avoiding “bad movies,” “bad things,” “bad influences,” and “bad television” appeared to coincided with her peers’ characterization of profane texts as containing “bad morals,” or “low standards.” In six of the Latter-day Saint youths’ responses, profane texts were characterized as “bad” texts that included “bad” things, which may have been anything that stood in contrast to their moral, religious, and cultural beliefs about proper conduct. Within this broad category of “bad things,” two of the Latter-day

Saint youth identified pornographic or sexually explicit material as elements of profane texts. And two identified swearing. Both of these – sexually explicit material and swearing – appeared to be inconsistent with their cultural/religious standards of conduct, but swearing was particularly interesting because the youth talked about swearing on a number of occasions. Six of the Latter-day Saint youth claimed to be exposed to swearing regularly at school. It appeared to bother them, and they cited it as an example of something they would consider profane and contrary to their religious practices.

Six of the Latter-day Saint youth stated that swearing was an improper activity and that refraining from swearing was a mark of their religious identity as practicing Latter-day Saints. For Jonah, refraining from swearing was closely connected to what it meant to be a Mormon. I asked him how being a Mormon had influenced him. This was his response:

Jonah: Well, I definitely act differently.

ER: Oh, is that right?

Jonah: Yes. I don't really like swear, you know. . . . It's kind of different being a Mormon.

Further into our conversation I asked him what it meant to be a Mormon at school. His response echoed his previous response about not swearing.

Jonah: Okay. Not to like A lot of people swear, like a lot. So, not swearing or using crude language, or any of that kind of stuff. You know, just that whole general area.

ER: Of, like, crude things?

Jonah: Yes.

"It's kind of different being a Mormon" Jonah said. Being a Mormon involved acting in certain ways, particularly refraining from swearing, and "that whole general area." When Jonah and his

peers talked about swearing it was always in relation to school peers. I did not observe the youth in school, so I do not have data to confirm, or refute, their statements, but the Latter-day Saint youth who talked about swearing all indicated the same things: Swearing was a profane cultural practice, and the words they used (or did not use) set them apart from others around them. Sophia related an experience in which peers at school asked her to “swear one time because they’ve never heard [her do it].” I asked her if she swore for them. She stated, “No. I’ve never sworn.” Sophia cited this example of refraining from profanity as an instance of the difficulties she faced trying to be a Mormon at school. Samantha cited a similar experience about her struggles upholding her religious and cultural beliefs and practices by avoiding profane words.

During a play rehearsal, Samantha discovered that one of her lines contained a swear word. Her response to the situation represented the influence of her cultural beliefs and practices as a Latter-day Saint youth. It also represented how she viewed herself, in contrast to some of her school peers. Samantha related the following experience:

But of course, the one line with a swear word had to be mine. And I know for a lot of people it would have been just acting, and I’m not saying that what I did was the only path. I think you could still be a faithful Mormon and still say an acting line with a swear word. It’s kind of a grey area. But since I don’t do it, I felt weird kind of participating. It was really awkward. I just stopped working in the middle of practicing our scene. I didn’t really know what to do. And so, I and my partner were staring at each other for ten seconds and she said, “It’s your line.” And I said, “I know but I can’t say it.” So I went and talked to the teacher and he was surprised but he said I could say, “You have a lot of nerve,” instead of the [swear] word. So, it wasn’t something that I’m like, “This is a make or break moment,” but it was a little decision that I made that was right for me.

And I wouldn't have done that if I wasn't a member. I would have just said it. And I think if I wasn't a member I would be swearing like all the other kids.

Samantha had performed in a number of plays at school and around Greenview City, but this was the first time she was faced with saying a swear word as part of a theatrical performance. For Samantha, this was an uncomfortable situation. She said that swearing, even as a performer, would have made her feel "weird." Yet, she went further in her account stating that if it had not been for her membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints she would not have bothered talking to her teacher about her unease at using a profane, or "bad," word.

Furthermore, Samantha stated that if it had not been for her religion she "would be swearing like all the other kids." Samantha, Sophia, and other Latter-day Saint youth claimed that the cultural beliefs and practices that they tried to uphold – particularly avoiding swearing – set them apart from many of their peers. For many of the Latter-day Saint youth, avoiding "bad things" appeared to mean refraining from engaging in activities that conflicted with their cultural and religious values, beliefs, and practices. The same appeared to hold true for texts. Profane texts appeared to be those texts that included "bad things" such as swearing that many of the Latter-day Saint youth clearly indicated were contrary to their cultural beliefs and practices. For the Methodists, swearing was not an indicator of profane texts; instead, Methodist youth indicated that insulting others and aggression against religions were elements of profane texts.

Methodists' Profane Texts. Five of the Methodist youth indicated that profane texts consisted of texts that disparaged religions and insulted others. Three of the five Methodist youth who I talked to about profane texts indicated that profane texts included those that engaged in "religion bashing," or speaking against the Bible. Although most of the Methodist youth did not read the Bible very often, they stated that it was an important part of their lives.

Some even said that they felt badly about not reading it more.²⁵ Six of the Methodist youth stated that they had a Bible in their home, and they said that at certain times in their lives it had played a critical role. Alex (Methodist) said that he saw the Bible playing an even more important role when he got older. He stated, "I'm too young, at the moment, to sit down and try to understand what it is saying But I think that it will become a big priority [when I'm older]." The next section will discuss in greater detail the role scripture played in the youths' lives, but before that I will demonstrate that the Bible was a valued text for many of the Methodist youth. Because the Bible was a valued text it seemed reasonable that the youth would consider profane those texts that disparaged the Bible. But, perhaps an equally valid interpretation for why texts that disparaged scripture were profane may have to do with the Methodists' culture of acceptance, and its limitations.

The Methodist youth in this study prided themselves on their open, accepting, tolerant environment. Melinda and others often stated, "Open hearts. Open minds," when indicating their rationale for accepting gays into the Church, or forgiving others for violating cultural norms or practices. Most of the Methodist youth indicated in interviews and during observations that others were entitled to their own opinions, and moreover, that these different opinions were a vital part of their community. Particularly in their responses to questions about discussions in religious contexts, all of the Methodist youth were clear that they valued others' ideas and contributions. Speaking about the open nature of discussions in religious contexts, Sarah (Methodist) stated, "I love it when people can see one simple thing in completely different ways." This acceptance appeared to extend into others' ideas that differed from their own; yet,

²⁵ During an interview, Joshua stated that he did not read the Bible very often. I asked him about it and he stated, "I feel bad." In a separate interview, Joshua said the same thing. Alex said, "I feel pretty bad that I don't [read the Bible more]." Kate made a similar statement. She identified several reasons for why she did not read the Bible more. I said, "I get the impression that you feel bad about not reading scripture." In response, she said, "Well, yah!" Kate then proceeded to explain how frustrating it was not to know more about the Bible, lamenting "I definitely would have liked to have, you know . . . just more of the stories and stuff like that."

in practice there was a line that should not be crossed. Holding and sharing a view was different than disparaging others for their views. When it came to profane texts, this became clear.

Jennifer (Methodist), for example, stated, “You can have a zillion books about religion, and I’m sure those are all great. But if one of those books were to start proving why other religions are wrong, [then] I feel like that might become offensive.” Furthermore, Joshua (Methodist) said that he found texts profane when they were “bashing on religions.” It was not necessarily the topic these youth found offensive, it appeared to be the application of the text to “proving . . . other religions wrong,” or “bashing” them. This, three of the Methodist youth indicated, was a characteristic of an offensive text. By indicating that texts that spoke against religious views were offensive, these three Methodist youth were indicating that people were entitled to their beliefs, but not if they openly disparaged others’.

This is closely related to another characteristic of profane texts that three of the Methodist youth identified; namely, texts that insulted other people or expressed hate. Jennifer (Methodist) talked extensively about this, contextualizing profane, insulting texts within the craft of writing. She stated that writers should try to express themselves as clearly as possible “without insulting others. The minute you start insulting people is the minute you lose all credibility.” She continued, “If you ever start insulting people you will completely lose your message because then you haven’t become profound, you become mean.” As an illustration of this Methodist congregation’s intolerance for insults or unkind speech, on rare occasions when an insult was offered, or suggested, it was met with a quick, direct response. In one instance, during Sol Café I overheard a small group of male youth talking. I did not hear their conversation, but Betsy, who was farther away than I was walked over and said firmly to the boys, “There are no put-downs here” (Methodist, April 5, 2009). Additionally, the phrase “God

loves you” was used in response to potentially insulting remarks. The following example is from my field notes:

[One of the adults] talks to the film class about what they should wear to the conference they are going to film. One of the youth turns to a male next to him wearing jeans and a hoodie and says, with a smile, “This is almost inappropriate for church.” [The adult leading the group] says to male youth in the jeans, “God loves you, whatever you wear.” The youth who had made the comment says, “As long as you wear something” (Methodist, October 26, 2008).

These examples illustrate how the Methodists in this congregation tried to create a space free from what they considered offensive, even hateful, speech. This included any language that could make others feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. Consistent with this practice, Melinda provided an example of a profane text. She stated, “[O]bviously, if someone said the ‘n’ word—like I’m going to lynch him. That is offensive.” The five Methodist youths’ conceptions of profane texts as those texts that were insulting to others and disparaging to religious beliefs and values were grounded in their cultural practice of creating a welcoming and accepting environment.

The Latter-day Saint and Methodist youths’ conceptions of profane texts were shaped by their cultures and histories. Understanding what was profane led to a more robust understanding of how the youth conceptualized sacred texts. In the following sections I explore the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youths’ notions of sacred texts.

Latter-day Saints’ Sacred Texts. It is clear that the youth in this study, particularly the Latter-day Saints, revered scripture. Speaking about the Book of Mormon, Timothy (Latter-day Saint) said, “I respect the book.” Elsewhere he called scripture “freaking awesome!” Jonah (Latter-day Saint) treated scripture with “more respect” than other books by reading it carefully

and thoughtfully, and trying to retain what he read, “instead of just reading it right then, right there.” Vincent (Latter-day Saint) felt that having scripture in his life was like having “this gigantic diamond sitting in front of you.” Perhaps because Latter-day Saint youth respected scripture, they read it and attended to it with more care and interest than other books. As Samantha (Latter-day Saint) said, “You should read [scripture] with a little more reverence.”

I asked Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) about scripture in his life. He said, that “everything revolves around the scriptures.” For the Latter-day Saint youth, this may not have been an overstatement. All of the participating Latter-day Saint youth I observed in seminary participated in regular scripture reading and stated that they did so at home as well. Indeed, every worship service included reading from scripture and indications that individuals should apply what they learned. Stephen (Latter-day Saint) summarized the foundational nature of scripture in his life when he said simply, “The scriptures are how I form opinions.” When talking about the place of scripture in their lives, all of the Latter-day Saint youth indicated that it was important, or to use some of their words, “really important” (Vincent), “a pretty big part of my life,” (Timothy), “very important” (Jonathan), and “hugely important” (Sophia). I wanted to know more about why they said that scripture was so important to them so that I could better understand their notion of sacred texts. Through interviews I found that seven of the Latter-day Saint youth indicated that scripture was important to them because they had grown up reading it. Vincent (Latter-day Saint), for example, said that he had been reading scripture “as long as I can remember.” Paul (Latter-day Saint) stated that he had been reading scripture, “probably, my whole life.” Stephen (Latter-day Saint) said that scripture was important to him because “I’ve been using them for—I guess ever since [I was] eight when I was baptized.” Then he continued, stating, “And [scripture] will probably be even more important next year because of seminary, and studying it even further.” For the Latter-day Saint youth who had grown up reading

scripture they appeared to struggle at times to articulate why scripture was so important to them. Here is a conversation I had with Timothy in which he tried to explain why scripture was important to him. He returned, again and again, to being raised in the Church.

Timothy: [Scriptures] are a pretty big part of my life, mostly once again because I was raised in the Church, with the Church in my life.

ER: Are there other books that are as or more important to you as the scriptures?

Timothy: Books are occasionally, pretty fun to read, but I mean I don't know why any single book or even a series could be something as big as the scriptures, in my life. Especially when . . . I was raised with the Church, with the Church in my life.

ER: So you're saying that the scriptures would be the most important books in your life. Did I hear that correctly?

Timothy: Yes.

ER: Why is that?

Timothy: Didn't we just go over the whole raised with the Church.

ER: I'd like more details on that. You mentioned that quite a few times, "because you were raised in the Church," which is important. . . .

Timothy: It just kind of became a regular part of my life. And the other principles I was taught as a kid were kind of based with the Church.

Scripture appeared to be important for Timothy, and he could explain why: Because he was raised in the Church. In this interview excerpt, he stated five times that being raised in the Church or having the Church part of his life explained why scripture was so important to him. Initially, I thought that Timothy was simply restating this notion of being raised in the Church

when he said, “[Scripture] just kind of became a regular part of my life.” Upon further analysis I began to interpret this statement as a representation of *how* it was that being raised in the Church made scripture an important part of Timothy’s life. That is, Timothy may have expressed that as a result of being raised in the Church scripture became important to him *because* it “became a regular part of [his] life.” The question, then, is how did this happen? How was it that being raised in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints could make scripture a regular – and important – part of Timothy’s life?

At the institutional level, presidents of the Church (*Ensign*, 2005) and apostles of the Church (Bednar, 2009; Nelson, 1999; Oaks, 1995; Perry, 1994) repeatedly counsel Church members to study scripture regularly. The Church also provides resources to families and lessons for the youth to help them study scripture. Moreover, the Church has instituted a four-year seminary program for high school aged youth that focuses on the primary scriptures for the Church: Book of Mormon, New Testament, Old Testament (including the Pearl of Great Price), and Doctrine and Covenants. From my observations, all of the Latter-day Saint youth in this study who regularly attended church, also regularly attended seminary (if they were in high school). Those youth who were not yet in high school anticipated attending seminary. Also, each week at Sunday worship services members give talks that draw heavily from scripture, and youth attend classes to learn about scripture and how to study it.

However, Timothy’s sister, Samantha, provided some insight into what scripture study looked like in practice in one Latter-day Saint family. On numerous occasions she explained how they used scripture in their family. I asked Samantha about reading scripture:

Samantha: We’ve always read scriptures as a family. And we used to just read them chapter by chapter, but now my parents have us ask gospel questions

because when we read them chapter by chapter we weren't really paying attention.

ER: [N]ow your parents have you ask gospel questions?

Samantha: Mhm.

ER: So, how does that work?

Samantha: Timothy made a box, so we write a gospel question down and then we draw a question out of the box each night and we talk about them and sometimes we look up scriptures for them.

Daily scripture reading appeared to be a common practice for Samantha and Timothy. Samantha (and Timothy) stated that they read scripture as a family. Samantha suggested that they approached scripture study in different ways to try to keep everyone interested and attentive. Analyses suggest that daily scripture study was a critical cultural practice for most of the Latter-day Saint youth. Because of this consistent institutional and familial approach to scripture study I argue that being raised in the Church could make scripture a regular part of some of the youths' lives and that cultural beliefs, values, and practices could help explain the Latter-day Saint youths' conception of sacred texts as those texts that they had grown up reading in the context of their religious traditions.

More specifically, six of the Latter-day Saint youth indicated that scripture was important to them because of various and specific ways in which it functioned in their everyday lives. For some youth, scripture reading made them feel better. Others indicated that it helped them perform better in school. Vincent (Latter-day Saint), for example, claimed that reading scripture helped him do well in school. I asked him how. He said, "Just the Lord's blessings." I asked if he could think of a specific example. In response, Vincent talked energetically about how scripture blessed his life through his school work:

I mean, I'll take fifteen minutes, and oh man, I mean, I could just take ten, fifteen minutes, maybe even a half-hour depending on how much [time] I can [read] that night. And I know that the next day I'm able to concentrate more. And understand the concepts that are being taught in school better. I can focus on doing my homework a lot quicker and so then I have time the next night to do my homework.

The ability to concentrate more on his school work and understand what he was studying was evidence for why scripture was an important part of Vincent's life. He stated that this became more apparent as he began attending seminary and reading scripture more regularly. Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) indicated a similar notion about the blessings of scripture reading when he stated that he read scripture and in other ways practiced his religion because "it's a commandment and I know that I'll be blessed if I do it." I asked him about those "blessings." He said: "I've been doing better in school, like ever since I started reading my scriptures regularly, and so, that's just one kind of big thing." Vincent and Jonathan indicated that scripture was important because of its influence in their academic lives. They both called it a "blessing" that the efforts they put forth to read scripture helped them in school. Jonathan called it a "big thing." Vincent and Jonathan did not indicate that other texts could do this for them. They also said that there was no other text that they would consider as or more important than scripture. It may be the case, then, that for these two youth one aspect of sacred texts was that these texts could "bless" one in ostensibly unrelated, but important, aspects of one's life, such as school.

Jonah and Sophia (Latter-day Saints) identified another aspect of the sacred nature of scripture when they characterized the importance of scripture in their lives by how it made them feel. Jonah stated that he read scripture every day. I asked him what he got out of his scripture reading. He said, "You just kind of feel great." I asked him to say more. He said:

Well, when I decide to read I get my scriptures. I open them. I read and then the feeling comes. Not while I'm reading, but afterwards [too]. It feels like you –. You just feel better. You feel better after you read the scriptures.

Jonah's sister stated that scriptures were "hugely important" in her life. She continued: "[T]hey are a big, guiding factor in my life. They kind of, how can I say this? They're like a daily reminder to me . . . that I'm loved." For Jonah and Sophia, scripture was important because it made them feel different than other texts. It made Jonah "feel great" and it made Sophia "feel loved." These feelings appeared to be unique to scripture for Jonah and Sophia, and one indicator for them that scripture was sacred. Neither of these two young people stated that other texts made them feel like this. For them, feeling loved and feeling great by engaging with scripture represented affective evidence that they were reading sacred texts.

In summary, Latter-day Saint youths' conceptions of sacred texts were shaped by how they functioned in their lives. For most of the Latter-day Saint youth, scripture was an important part of their religious cultures and practices. Scripture may have been sacred to many of the youth because they had grown up learning from scripture, listening to it, and reading from it themselves and with their families. Over time and through experiences many of the Latter-day Saint youth had developed a notion of scripture as sacred. Moreover, some of the youth stated that they believed that scripture was sacred because it had brought them specific "blessings" such as improved academic success and helped them feel good and loved.

Methodists' Sacred Texts. By asking the Methodist youth about the importance of scripture, I attempted to get at their conception of sacred texts. They indicated that the Bible was generally important in their lives, stating that it was "a cool book" (Melinda), "important, for sure" (Joshua), "a holy text" (Jennifer), and "very important" (Daniel). As I explored their statements further I found that the Methodist youth held a number of views about the place of

sacred texts in their lives. These included how it functioned in their lives and conditional statements about the Bible being important if it did certain things. Interestingly, two youth indicated notions of talk as sacred text. However, the most common characteristic of sacred text for the Methodist youth in this study related to the historical importance of the Bible.

Four of the youth indicated that they felt that the Bible was important because of its historical role for individuals or because it had been around so long. I asked Joshua (Methodist) why he read the Bible. His response indicated a conception of the importance of the Bible based on its historical and religious nature:

Well, I mean it's the text that goes along with our religion for thousands of years or so. I think it is important that people throughout the centuries . . . read the Bible. [The Bible] and a couple of ancient Greek texts are the backbone of teaching for Western teachings.

Joshua used several words or phrases expressing the historical importance of the Bible. These included *thousands*, *centuries*, *ancient*, and *Western teaching*. In one instance he compared the Bible to ancient Greek texts in terms of its historical importance as a fundamental text in Western civilization. On another occasion Joshua called the Bible "the common . . . foundation of religion." For him, the Bible as a sacred text appeared to rest, at least in part, on its place in religious history over time. Daniel (Methodist) appeared to agree. He said that the Bible "teaches you these fantastic lessons." Beyond the actual lessons, Daniel appeared most impressed with the way these lessons remained an important source of learning for individuals over the millennia. Daniel continued: "[The Bible] teaches you [in] such a constant [way], you know. Just the fact that thousands of people throughout history – the same lessons [from the Bible] have been important to them." Taking it a step further, Daniel stated that when he read the Bible he tried to remember its place in history by remembering that it has "been important to people for thousands of years." I asked Sarah (Methodist) about scripture in her life. She said

that the Bible was “solid.” I asked her to explain. She said that she believed that the Bible was solid because “it has existed for so long, and I think the ability of something like the Bible to make it through so much time is very impressive.” Similar to Joshua and Daniel, Sarah indicated that the Bible’s longevity was a mark of its importance. She called it “impressive.” Kate (Methodist) stated the Bible was “kind of cool because it is so long lasting.” By this she meant that its “old words . . . still apply.” Four of the Methodist youth indicated a conception of sacred texts that related to the historical and religious longevity of the text. Perhaps Kate alluded to this when she said that the Bible was “the basis for so much faith.”

These youths’ interest in the historical continuity of scripture may have paralleled the religious history that was so important to the Methodist congregation they attended. Indeed, this history was inscribed on the very walls of their church and may have been a critical part of the congregation’s continuance. As identified in Chapter Four, the Methodist church building was almost as old as Greenvew City. It occupied a prominent position in downtown Greenvew City and played an important role then and now in the religious, civic, and performance atmosphere of the city. Plaques, pictures, posters, murals, and quotes representing the religious and cultural history of the Church and its members adorned the walls of the church. Several youth and adults also expressed an interest in knowing more about the beginnings of Methodism by learning more about its founder, John Wesley. The Methodist youth who stated that the Bible was important because it had endured through history as a fundamental religious text were perhaps connecting with the importance of the historical legacy of their own religious tradition, as represented on the walls of the church and in the minds and hearts of fellow Methodists.

In addition to the historical character of the Bible, two Methodist youth indicated that they believed talk was a sacred text. Although these youths’ views did not necessarily represent

their peers' responses, I suspect that more of their peers may have sympathized with their views based on my observations and the youths' comments about the cultural importance of talk in Methodist religious contexts. Melinda (Methodist) stated the Bible was "important, but if you you're asking me if there is an importance on a scale – where I would put discussions at church, as opposed to the Bible – I would put the Bible a lot lower." To make sure I understood her, I asked, "You would say that the discussions here would be more important than the Bible?" Melinda stated, "Oh, way more important! I learn a heck of a lot more! Oh, yeah." Jennifer (Methodists) made a similar statement when I asked her about the role of scripture in her life: "I would much rather talk to people in my church and hear other peoples' thoughts and opinions than read [scripture] to try and help strengthen my relationship with God." When I asked her to elaborate she said that it was "just the way I've grown up. . . . [T]he way I strengthen my faith the most is by talking to other people." For Melinda and Jennifer, talk appeared to be very important. They both indicated that it was the primary means through which they learned in religious contexts. Talk was a critical, perhaps, even a sacred form of text for them. Observations and interview responses from other Methodist youth suggest that talk was indeed a vital element of their religious literacy practices in religious contexts. I discuss this more fully later in this chapter, but for now I remind readers that (a) in Methodist youth gatherings seating was always arranged circularly to accommodate talk, (b) religious lessons were often built around small and large group discussions, (c) every Methodist youth stated in the interviews that discussions were an important practice in religious contexts, and (d) many of the youth felt that religious contexts were safe places at least in part because one could talk without the worry of judgment. For these reasons, I suspect that a greater number of Jennifer and Melinda's peers may have sympathized with their view of talk as sacred text.

A third element of sacred texts expressed by Methodist youth related to how scripture functioned in their lives. Unlike Latter-day Saint youth, most of the Methodist youth did not express having regular, faith-building experiences with scripture; however, two of the Methodist youth indicated that scripture was important to them because they had experienced its influence in powerful, memorable ways. I asked Sarah (Methodist) how long she had been reading the Bible. She recalled the following experience:

I remember my Mom reading to me when I was little. Before bed, she'd read a story from the bible. And sometimes, I would read when I was a little bit older and I could read it. . . . [My bed] had this comforter on it and I had this nightlight that was a touch nightlight. And my Mom would come in and turn it on. We'd lie down on the bed and she would read to me from the Bible – the children's bible. . . . I love those stories. I love reading out of that book. And at the time I didn't really understand what I was hearing, where it came from and all the meanings behind it. When you're young, you can only understand so many morals or so many ideas that the stories are based on.

Memories like this were common for Sarah. These experiences suggest how she developed ideas about the importance of scripture when she was young, even if she may not have understood what her mother was reading to her. As Sarah's mother took time with her, in quiet moments, to read and talk about scripture, Sarah may have begun to develop an appreciation for scripture in her own life. Over time she may have felt that scripture was important, even foundational for her. As Sarah said of the Bible, "It just has so much more weight behind it, you know. There's a solid substance to it." Perhaps because of the moral weight the Bible carried for Sarah, it was also a place of safekeeping. In her Bible Sarah placed numerous slips of paper with notes about exams, notes from friends, notes with thoughts she had as she read verses, and other important papers. She said that she put things in her Bible because "it's like a safe place; I

always know where it is. I'm always reading it." For Sarah, the Bible was a central text. She learned through social experiences as a child that it was important and worth reading. As a teenager, she said that she respected it because of its "solid substance" which may have allowed it to function as a place of security.

Speaking about the Bible, Jennifer (Methodist) said that when "[I]start to question [my religion], it's always really nice to be able to have that source to go back to, to kind of like be a solid foundation." Jennifer also referred to the Bible as "the fundamental building block." She said that reading the Bible allowed her to "retrench and start over," which helped her realize, "Okay, this is what I *do* solidly believe." She provided the following explanation to show how important the Bible was to her:

Just take away like the icing from the cake. Just like get rid of all the glitter and just start again from the very beginning. And I know I've had to do that before, especially last year when like I really had a hard time with my parents. I like had to go back and strip away all that. . . . And [get back to] what were the basic foundations, like: you're a good person, treat people the way you want to be treated. Kind of the basic fundamental building blocks. So, that's why I use [the Bible].

Like Sarah, Jennifer could document specific social and cultural experiences with scripture that contributed to its important role in her life. When everything was stripped away, the Bible and its teaching remained for Jennifer. She called these "the basic foundations" of her life. This is especially noteworthy because Jennifer stated that she did not read the Bible very often on her own. Nonetheless, she saw it as central – what Sarah called the "ultimate thing" – in her life, having experienced its importance during a difficult time with her parents. In Jennifer's example, the Bible appeared to help her manage the social relationships with her parents by helping her "strip away" the issues that had come between her and her parents, which appeared to

facilitate Jennifer's return to the basic principles of her life that she had learned at home and church since she was a child.

Jennifer's conception of the importance of the Bible appeared to rest on how well it helped her navigate the demands of her life. In the aforementioned experience, the Bible was important because it helped Jennifer remember the basic, important elements of her life, which helped fix her relationship with her parents. If the Bible could not serve these sorts of important functions, Jennifer indicated in an interview that she would not considerate it a sacred text:

Again, I feel like [the Bible] is just a tool that can be used for those who it works for. For some people, it does I don't know, just reading something, in general, will not help me be better in what I feel is the main part of Christianity, which is how you interact with other people I don't see that reading a book will help much if you don't put it to use. . . . [I]f you read Dr. Seuss and after reading that you became a better person, [then] that would be more useful to you than the Bible. And that should be considered a more sacred text to you. It's the message itself that you get out of it. It is useless unless reading it helps you implement it, execute the message. So yeah, it's not the book itself, it's what it teaches you and then how you actually use the information.

Jennifer expressed a view that sacred texts were sacred if one practiced them and "became a better person" as a result of reading – and living – them. This particular functional view of sacred texts was not expressed by her peers; however, Jennifer's view indicated the practical aspect of scripture in her life, which subsequent chapters will address in terms of how Methodist and Latter-day Saint youth sought to apply scripture.

In summary, the Methodist youth held a view of sacred texts as those texts, such as the Bible, that (a) have endured the weathering of history and still resonate with people today, and (b) function in important ways in their lives. Two of the Methodist youth also indicated that for

them talk could be a sacred text because it helped them learn important lessons in religious contexts. In all of this, the sacred nature of scripture appeared to be a social and cultural construct, drawn from these youths' experiences as members of this particular Methodist congregation.

Clearly, for many of the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth scripture was a core text in their lives, and at the center of much of their social and cultural religious literate practices. Yet, even though scripture was important to the youth it was not necessarily easy for them to read; they often struggled to make sense of these linguistically and stylistically dated and complex texts. In the next section I explore the difficulties the youth had with scripture to provide a richer representation of the place of scripture in their lives.

“Boring, long, and tedious”: The Difficulties of Reading Scripture

The ACT (2006) recommended a helpful set of criteria for identifying complex texts (abbreviated RSVP). Complex texts, ACT stated, can be described as follows:

- **Relationships:** Interactions among ideas or characters in the text are subtle, involved, or deeply embedded.
- **Richness:** The text possesses a sizable amount of highly sophisticated information conveyed through data or literary devices.
- **Structure:** The text is organized in ways that are elaborate and sometimes unconventional.
- **Style:** The author's tone and use of language are often intricate.
- **Vocabulary:** The author's choice of words is demanding and highly context dependent.
- **Purpose:** The author's intent in writing the text is implicit and sometimes ambiguous.

As defined by these criteria, scripture may be described as a complex text. For example, in the Bible, Peter's relationship with Jesus or Moses' relationship with the Egyptians and the Hebrews may be instances of relationships that were “subtle, involved, or deeply embedded” in

traditional ways of being in ancient Israel. Moreover, scripture literary devices such as metaphor, analogy, symbolism, parallelism, as well as Hebraic poetry, and cultural and intertextual allusions convey vast amounts of culturally and spiritually complicated information. As for the intricate use of language, the books of Isaiah, Psalms, and Proverbs in the Bible, and the books of First Nephi and Second Nephi in the Book of Mormon, may be prime examples. In the book of Isaiah, for example, by weaving current events, past prophecies, cultural practices, and future prophecies together in poetic fashion, Isaiah's use of language, textual structure, and vocabulary is often intricate, unconventional, and context dependent. Furthermore, without careful, extended reading and the use of supplementary materials, the book of Isaiah's purposes may be difficult to identify. For the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth, scripture was often complex and difficult to read. The youth identified two key reasons for these difficulties: (a) the intricate, antiquated language and (b) contradictions.

“The language is thick”: **Difficulties of Scriptural Language.** In their experiences, youth from both denominations found that scripture language – including diction, syntax, and literary devices – made scripture difficult to read. This is understandable for the Latter-day Saint youth, whose scripture was written in the Elizabethan English of the King James Version of the Bible. But Methodist youth also made the same claims about scripture language, even though they read more modern translations of the Bible like the New American Standard Edition and The Message. I asked Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) about reading scripture. He said “they’re different [difficult] to read because they’re worded differently, like there’s *thy* and *thou*, and they kind of speak differently.” Daniel (Methodist) suggested that those who wrote the Bible decided to “throw in words like *thy* and *thou*—sort of old English—to make it sound more holy and royal.” Jennifer (Methodist) stated that the language of the Bible was difficult because it was “about ancient times, [so] they’ll probably . . . [talk about] Mesopotamians and the Heathens, [but] I

don't know who those people are." Nearly every youth in this study made similar comments about the difficult diction of scripture. The "old fashioned words," (Samantha, Latter-day Saint) it seemed, got in the way.

Five of the Latter-day Saint youth also indicated how syntax made scripture hard to understand. I cite Timothy here because he was especially articulate. I asked Timothy (Latter-day Saint) what made scripture difficult for him.

Timothy: [I]t's like another language.

ER: Tell me about it. What's hard about that?

Timothy: Does that really need to be asked? Do you really need to ask the difference between "You like potatoes," and "Thou art one who enjoys the meal of potatoes?"

ER: I want to get your perspective—what is it that's so difficult? You talk about the language. Anything else?

Timothy: Hmm. Um.

ER: Is there anything else?

Timothy: What's so difficult? I'm not sure—it just is—the fact that it's not English.

ER: Okay.

Timothy: I'm sure people say that it's Old English, but I just clarify it as not English at all. The language is so hard. It's like so weird.

Timothy separated the Early Modern English language of scripture from the English he spoke when he called scripture English "another language," "not English," and "so weird." Timothy's struggle with scriptural language suggests that syntax, specifically, may have been a problem. "Thou art one who enjoys the meal of potatoes," for example, was syntactically more unusual to

him than “You like potatoes.”²⁶ These unfamiliar arrangements of words were most common in the Early Modern English language scripture as used most often by the Latter-day Saint youth. This syntax may have caused some of the Latter-day Saint youth some frustration, at least initially. But through repeated exposure and a great deal of practice, some of the youth began to develop proficiency with this syntax. One youth (Jonathan) even developed a method of navigating syntactic complexities by literally rephrasing each verse into what he called “modern English.” Samantha (Latter-day Saint) engaged in a similar practice by replacing unfamiliar and confusing words and phrases with more familiar equivalents.

An additional linguistic feature that gave both groups of youth in this study some difficulty was the use of dated literary devices. Given that many scriptural language complexities were historical, the language in scripture also carried curious referents from cultures centuries removed from today’s youth. These referents appeared to complicate the youths’ understanding of scripture. Daniel (Methodist) and Stephen (Latter-day Saint), for example, stated that the strange metaphors made scripture difficult. “You’re kind of confused because the language is so weird. The metaphors and symbols can be fuzzy” (Stephen). On one occasion a Methodist youth asked incredulously, “Why are there so many farming parables in the Bible?” He said they were “quite comical,” and to support his point read the title of one of them: “The parable of the yeast.” He looked to his peers and laughed (Methodist, September 21, 2008). Moreover, Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) identified the unusual symbolism as a cause of her difficulty with reading scripture. Overall, the words themselves, the arrangement of the words, and the use of unusual cultural referents and literacy devices made reading scripture difficult for Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth. These difficulties may have been the impetus for Jennifer (Methodist) to call scripture “boring, long, and tedious.”

²⁶ However, Timothy’s ability to generate an example of Early Modern English suggests that he, at some level, had developed familiarity with the syntax of the King James Version of the Bible.

Scriptural Contradictions. Only Methodist youth stated that scripture was difficult to read because it contradicted itself and sometimes the youths' own personal beliefs. Four of the Methodist youth indicated that they believed scripture contradicted, at times, their own beliefs. In this regard, Melinda and Jennifer (Methodists) expressed particularly strong opinions, the force of which was not always characteristic of their peers. Melinda, for example, found the Bible frustrating because it was sexist. "Obviously, men wrote it," she said. I asked her tell me more. She stated:

I mean some of the things are just like completely out there, like it's ridiculous. There are some things that are like, "Your wife will not cheat on you, but you can cheat on your wife like six times and it's okay, but not seven." That's obviously out of context, but you know what I'm saying. . . . It's so ridiculous.

Melinda continued, explaining how she approached the Bible in light of her belief that parts of it contradicted her personal views.

Melinda: I go in there with a heavy sense of "this is a load of" [Laughs]

ER: [Laughs] So, that's what you go in thinking?

Melinda: I go in thinking like, "Ah, this is not exactly all true," and so I'm going to pick out bits and pieces that work for me. And I do, I pick out bits and pieces that work for me.

ER: So, how do you know which bits and pieces to pick out?

Melinda: The ones that make sense to me.

ER: Okay.

Melinda: Like some things are just like way out there, and you're like, "Ah! This is ridiculous, you know." And then like other things actually do make sense.

In this excerpt, Melinda concentrated her remarks on drawing attention to the parts of the Bible she believed were ridiculous and sexist. These parts troubled her. As with other Methodist youth, Melinda's personal views and scripture did not always coincide. These conflicting views were an issue for Melinda because she claimed to be a Christian who believed in the Bible, yet, some of her personal beliefs were in conflict with its teachings. Jennifer (Methodist) expressed similar feelings. In explaining the episode in which God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, (Genesis 22) and then commanded Abraham to stop, Jennifer stated, "I don't think God is a trickster. I don't think he would do that to people." She then explained, "Just the way I learned about God, no matter how many times you sin he'll always be there for you. He'll always love you. He'll protect you and carry you when you're down." This episode in which Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac did not represent the God that Jennifer thought she had grown to know through her experiences with religion and religious texts as she had grown up in the Methodist church. These types of scriptural episodes appeared to contradict Jennifer's personal beliefs, leading her, at times, to say, "Oh, I don't see it that way" when reading scripture.

For Melinda, points of contradiction influenced how she approached scripture. She said that she believed what the Bible said, somewhat. She did not read the Bible often, mostly at church and occasionally on her own, but when she did read, she "read with a heavy dose of skepticism," which she often voiced. On one occasion, Melinda read aloud the episodes in Mark 1:16-20 where Simon, Andrew, James, and John leave their professions and families and follow Jesus. Melinda looked up from the Bible and said, "This is unbelievable! A son won't leave a father." During public scripture reading Melinda interspersed the reading with comments such as, "I believe that," or "That's not exactly what happened." It appeared that Melinda was constantly evaluating scripture based on her own beliefs and experiences. In the end, Melinda's practice of applying "a heavy dose of skepticism" to her scripture reading may have led her to

reject the parts that contradicted her personal beliefs and “pick out the bit and pieces that work[ed] for [her].”

In addition to personal contradictions, three of the Methodist youth indicated that sometimes scripture contradicted itself. This, they said, made it difficult for them to read it. Here is an excerpt from a conversation I had with Joshua (Methodist):

Joshua: [I]n the Bible, you read a lot of like contradictions. And like maybe things you don't necessarily agree with, so that's kind of tough when you're supposed to agree with it and it's supposed to agree with itself.

ER: So, what do you do when you come across some of these discrepancies?

Joshua: I kind of like think it over and I just have to kind of either like put it in the back of my mind and think about it later or kind of make a decision on it.

ER: Can you think of any that you've had recently?

Joshua: There's some in the Old Testament, you know, “an eye for an eye.” And then in the New Testament, you know, “forgive your neighbor, er, forgive your enemies.” “Turn the other cheek,” that's another one. And so you kind of have to think, you know, [about the] context and how things have changed over time and maybe we should go with the newer one.

Similar to Melinda, Joshua identified personal contradictions that he had with the Bible, but he also focused on intertextual contradictions between the Old and New Testaments. These contradictions made it difficult for him to read the Bible as absolute truth. As with Melinda, Joshua and other Methodist youth did not appear to struggle with decoding scripture; instead, they appeared to struggle with unequivocally accepting what it said. Daniel (Methodist), for

example, stated, “in terms of if I believe every single word of it. No. The way I look at it is metaphorical.” Jennifer (Methodist) also stated that it was difficult for her to accept that the Bible was “face-value true,” which meant that she did not “believe [it] word for word.” Alex and Kate (Methodists) made similar statements about not taking the Bible literally. Part of this may have had to do with the way in which the Bible seemed to contradict itself, and their experiences with scripture at home and in religious contexts. Jennifer referenced the episode in which God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) because “people were sinning all over.” She summarized the episode by stating, “God strikes them down to show that He won’t tolerate sins.” And then Jennifer made her point, perhaps alluding to episodes elsewhere in the Bible that may have appeared to her to conflict with God’s vengeance and destruction. She asked, “What happened to Him loving everyone?”

Although none of the youth in the study indicated that they rejected the Bible outright, some Methodist youth questioned the Bible’s coherence with their own personal beliefs, while others, like Joshua struggled to make sense of the Bible’s internal inconsistencies.²⁷ In terms of his actual literate practices, Joshua said that these inconsistencies demanded a great deal of mental effort on his part. He had to “think over [the inconsistencies],” tuck them away “in the back of my mind and think about [them] later,” and think historically and culturally about how “things have changed.” In the end, Joshua might have been able to “kind of make a decision” about resolving the contradictions, but not without serious personal effort.

Latter-day Saints and Scripture. Analyses of the data suggest that for most Latter-day Saint youth struggling to read scripture was a common characteristic of their religious literate practice, but identifying points of contradiction with or within scripture was not. Indeed, none of

²⁷ On another occasion, Joshua related an experience in which he listened to a sermon about the fall of Jericho (Joshua 6). Joshua was struck by the “slaughter [of] everyone inside.” He called it, “kind of like a religious cleansing, like racial cleansing.” In response to this part of the sermon Joshua stated that “it’s kind of an awkward story to go along with the New Testament—peace to all.”

them indicated concerns about the truth claims contained in scripture or the substance of scripture. The closest Latter-day Saint youth got to disagreeing with scripture was stating that they were “confused” about why something occurred (Samantha), or had a “question about something [because they did] not understand it right away” (Sophia). Sophia added, “It’s not that I really disagree with anything.” Every other Latter-day Saint youth stated that they did not disagree with scripture. I pressed the youth who simply stated that they had no disagreement. A conversation I had with Vincent (Latter-day Saint) is provided below:

ER: Are there times that you don’t agree with what you read in the scriptures or other religious texts?

Vincent: Nope.

ER: Like you read something and say, “I’m not quite sure about that.”

Vincent: Nope.

ER: Really?

Vincent: Yeah.

In this excerpt, I tried to lower the bar on what it meant to disagree with scripture by framing it as something that “I’m not quite sure about.” Yet, Vincent remained firm: “Nope.” I had a similar conversation with Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) in which I asked if he disagreed with non-canonical works such as Church published magazines. Like Vincent, Jonathan stated that he did not disagree. Jonathan even laughed, stating, “I can’t remember a time where I’ve [laughs] disagreed with anything in the scriptures.” For Jonathan, and the other Latter-day Saint youth, disagreeing with scripture did not appear to be a common occurrence. The evidence suggests that none of these Latter-day Saint youth indicated concerns about scriptural contradictions or the substance of scripture. Why is that? Analyses of interview responses and observational notes did not provide evidence that addressed this question; however, analyses of Latter-day

Saint artifacts provided some insight for why some of the Latter-day Saint youth may not have openly express concerns (if they had any) about scriptural contradictions. Based on my analyses I argue that some of these Latter-day Saint youth may not have articulated concerns about scriptural contradictions because of the influence of their institutional conceptualizations of revelation and their perspective on the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

In terms of revelation, Latter-day Saints claim that God continues to reveal truth to individuals and that this revelation can guide one in the pursuit of truth. One of the standard sacred works for Latter-day Saints is the Articles of Faith written by Joseph Smith, their founding prophet (Pearl of Great Price, 1981). The Articles of Faith are 13 statements of the fundamental beliefs of the Church. It was typical for these statements to appear in lesson manuals, talks by ward members, and talks by general authorities during general conferences. Moreover, because in this congregation youth were required to know the Articles of Faith to advance to upper level religious classes, receive awards for their religious commitment, and graduate from seminary, it is likely that the Latter-day Saint youth in this study had an idea of the contents of these statements. Number nine is relevant here. It reads: “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” (Pearl of Great Price, 1981, p.60). This statement expresses a belief in the past, present, and future existence of revelation. When one believes that God can and will “reveal many great and important things,” it may be of little importance that one thinks scripture may *currently* contradict itself or one’s personal beliefs. Some Mormon youth may have reasoned that if God reveals truth, then current or future revelation may shed light on confusing or perhaps contradictory scriptural passages which may clear up any ostensible contradictions. In short, insofar as Latter-day Saint youth affirmed this particular Article of Faith, they may have held their views about scriptural contradiction (if they had them) in abeyance,

waiting on revelation to clarify confusion. This practice would appear to be in accordance with Latter-day Saint conceptions of revelation.

Another relevant Article of Faith expressed views about the Bible and the Book of Mormon, which may inform Latter-day Saint youths' lack of statements about scriptural contradictions. Article eight reads in part: "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly" (Pearl of Great Price, 1981, p.60). Unlike other Christian faiths, Mormonism does not subscribe to the infallibility of the Bible. Latter-day Saints claim to believe that the Bible is "the word of God," but they do not believe that it has been rendered accurately in its current form. Analysis of the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Version of the Bible revealed frequent references to Joseph Smith's re-translation of portions of the Bible. Some of the smaller re-translations are contained in footnotes.²⁸ Lengthier re-translations are contained in an appendix.²⁹ For Latter-day Saint youth who adhere to this tenet of their faith, contradictions in/with the Bible may be relatively easy to overlook when one believes that the Bible is only acceptable, "as far as it is translated correctly." A contradiction that may give pause to a Methodist youth may quite simply be considered by a Latter-day Saint youth a portion of the Bible that was not properly translated. It would be a simple thing, perhaps, to not bother with or note the ostensible contradictions in a book that one believed was inaccurately rendered. Another interpretation for why these Latter-day Saint youth did not identify contradictions with scripture may be that they simply did not have examples of others doing it. During my observations in worship services and seminary I did not observe anybody question scriptural content or religious principles or doctrine.

²⁸ For example, in Exodus the KJV reads that "the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh" (Exodus 9:12; see also Exodus 7:3, 13; 10:20). The Joseph Smith Translation reads "Pharaoh hardened his heart."

²⁹ Some of these are substantive re-translations of a single verse, such as Exodus 33:20. Others are re-translations of much larger passages, such as John 1:1-34.

It warrants further note, however, that the Latter-day Saint youth also did not provide evidence of contradictions with the Book of Mormon either. This, I argue, may have stemmed from a belief much different than that presented for their lack of concern for contradictions in the Bible. Unlike their belief that the Bible is correct only if it is translated correctly – as provided by Joseph Smith – Latter-day Saint doctrine suggests that the Book of Mormon *is* translated correctly. Joseph Smith stated “that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion” (Book of Mormon: Introduction, 1981). Moreover, the second half of the eighth Article of Faith comes on the heels of the conditional belief in the Bible. It reads: “[W]e also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God” (Pearl of Great Price, 1981, p.60). The clear difference in this statement is the absence of the conditional belief. In practice, I observed Latter-day Saint youth in this study state that they believed that the Book of Mormon was true. I observed these claims of faith during a public worship service in which three female youth addressed the congregation of about 250 people. Each of the youth talked about her experiences learning about the Book of Mormon. And each of them made a statement about her belief in the book, such as, “I know that the Book of Mormon is true” (Latter-day Saint, May, 3, 2010). Unlike possible reasons for not articulating contradictions they may have found in the Bible, the Latter-day Saint youth may have not expressed contradictions with the Book of Mormon (if they had any) because they believed that it *was* translated correctly and that it was true³⁰ and, therefore, they may have understood their criticisms as ineffectual, or even irrelevant.

The Latter-day Saint and Methodist youths’ conceptions of scripture provided crucial knowledge about the importance and complexity of scripture in their lives and insight into some of the cultural values, beliefs, and practices that influenced these religious literate practices. In

³⁰ Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) stated as much. She said, speaking of the Book of Mormon, “this is something that we know is true and that I know is true.”

various ways, the challenges identified here – language, personal contradictions, and internal textual contradictions – made scripture difficult for the youth to read; yet, as the previous section identified, many of the youth *still* read scripture. Knowing something of the youths' conceptions of scripture informs an important question in this study: What did the youths' literate practices look like? I address this question in the next section by presenting findings about the youths' religious Discourses in religious contexts.

The Literate Practices of Religious Youth

Gee (1996) offers a way of making sense of literacy as social practice by conceptualizing literacy in relation to Discourses. Gee distinguishes between little *d* discourses and big *D* Discourses by calling the former “connected stretches of language” (p.127). Big *D* Discourses are ways of talking, acting, listening, moving, believing, and using tools at certain times in certain contexts. Discourses are socially-accepted “ways of being in the world” (p. 127) that identify one as belonging to certain groups or communities. Gee explains Discourses as “identity kits” that come with instructions for taking on specific social roles that others can recognize. One may be said to be in a particular Discourse when others can identify him as acting, talking, and thinking “in ‘appropriate’ ways with the ‘appropriate’ props at the ‘appropriate’ times in the ‘appropriate’ places” (Gee, 1999, p.17). Discourses provide a way to demonstrate the cultural forces that shaped the way the youth in this study engaged with the world through the valued literate practices of reading, talking, and writing.

Print Discourses: Learning and Applying

Print Discourses represented ways of engaging with written texts, within religious contexts, in such a way that distinguished religious youth as knowledgeable “insiders” of particular religious communities. As identified, the primary print Discourse was scripture reading, inside and outside of religious contexts. Religion appeared to be important to the

youth, and print Discourses provided ways for youth to represent their religious “ways of being in the world” (Gee, 1996) through reading. One important way youth from both denominations did this was through the way they read scripture. The unique ways of reading scripture were grounded in the Methodist and Latter-day Saint religious cultures, both of which highly valued scripture. Youth from both denominations who engaged in print Discourses could (a) demonstrate their commitment to learning about their faith, and (b) obtain the resources to live in ways consistent with their religious beliefs. Within these two broad aspects of learning and applying, Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth had their own distinct variations.

Using Scripture. Using scripture demonstrated religious ways of being in the world; specifically that the youth were committed to learning about their faith, and knowledgeable about their faith. Most of the youth from both denominations indicated that they read scripture differently than they read non-scripture, suggesting that there were particular ways of reading scripture that were distinct from reading other texts, such as voluntary non-sacred texts and school texts. The value the youth from both denominations placed on scripture shaped the way the youth approached it. Youth from both denominations identified to me the following ways that marked their scripture reading as unique from their reading of other texts, primary school-related texts or self-selected, voluntary texts:

- They mentally reviewed material from prior reading sessions,
- Related reading to life experiences,
- Read more often and included prayer,
- Made connections with scriptural events or principles,
- Read *to* understanding and *until* they understood,
- Read with more emotion and respect,
- Looked for lessons and principles,

- Read slower, with more focus,
- “Mulled things over,”
- Read, intending to apply principles,
- Used cross references and other resources,
- Discussed what they read with peers and adults,
- Imagined what was going on,
- Highlighted/marked important passages, and
- Tried to retain what they read beyond the immediate context.

I could not determine the veracity of these claims about the way their scripture reading was different than their reading of other texts because I did not observe their personal textual studies. However, in comparison to other types of texts, Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth indicated to me that scripture was fundamentally more important to them. Scripture reading was not always casual reading for them. As they read and used scripture, Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth demonstrated ways in which they could represent their religious “ways of being” through print. Latter-day Saints and Methodists had distinct ways of doing this.

Methodist Print Discourses. The Methodist youth in this study did not use scripture extensively in religious contexts. Their actual reading of scripture was limited, typically to one to seven verses at a time. During observations, I found that scripture and scripture reading held less prominence than discussions and that scripture reading was most often closely tied to discussions. The ability to discuss principles from scripture was a common Methodist Discourse related to scripture reading. I talk about discussions more fully when I discuss the Methodists’ culture of interpretation as an aspect of their oral Discourses, but in this section I will demonstrate the relationship between scripture reading and discussing. I will also demonstrate the social currency youth could acquire by being able to relate Bible stories.

In the Methodist religious contexts in this study, adults often used scripture to introduce discussions. One representative example of using scripture to begin discussions was when a teacher told the story of David and Bathsheba to begin a discussion about desire as part of the Sex, God, and Morality class.

When [the teacher's done] she says, "That story is about desire." She asks for the moral of the story. Melinda says, "Don't have sex with a man's wife." [Another youth] says, "Think before you act." [The teacher] asks, "At what point should he have stopped?" Several youth say that David should have stopped looking. [The teacher] talks about how we dress and how it affects those around us. Melinda says, "I don't want to sound like a crazy lesbian, but girls look at other girls." Several youth comment on the differences between male and females. Indeed, they seem interested in talking about this topic, but [the teacher] pulls them back by reminding them that they are talking about desire (Methodist, February 1, 2009).

In this excerpt, the teacher retold the story of David and Bathsheba to begin a discussion about desire. The youth appeared interested in the teacher's account of the story. They appeared equally interested in sharing their thoughts about it. Using scripture to begin a discussion was a common practice in Methodist Sunday school classes. In the next excerpt from the same class the teacher used scripture again to discuss the concept of desire. The youth appeared to know that reading the passage in Romans chapter 7 was intended to spark discussion, as demonstrated by Melinda offering her thoughts without a formal invitation after the teacher finished reading the passage.

[The teacher] reads Romans 7:17-20 from her notes. . . . When she's done reading Melinda says, "I feel like that's teenagers. That's the definition of teenagers." [The teacher] says that behind certain things are deeper desires. She uses the example of fat

people eating and says that it's not about food, it's [about] something else driving them to eat . . . [The teacher] asks, "How does this relate to what might be behind our sexual desires?" [One youth] talks about sex filling up empty space. [Another youth] says that feeling wanted might be behind sex (Methodist, February 1, 2009).

The youth appeared to have been socialized into the close relationship between scripture reading and discussion through frequent use of this approach in religious contexts. Using scripture as a discussion starter was not isolated to the Sex, God, and Morality class. In each of the classes that I observed scripture was used in this way, with the exception of the Divine Light Media film class which was intended to teach youth how to shoot, edit, and produce films.

Using scripture to begin discussions may have been shaped by the Methodists' self-proclaimed "liberal" views. I use *liberal* advisedly. It was a term used by youth and adults to express a certain social orientation of their congregation and Greenvine City. Here, I use it to represent willingness or at least tolerance for multiple interpretations of scripture. The United Methodist Church does not teach that there is one single way to best interpret scripture ("Official version," n.d., para. 1; "Reflecting on our faith," n.d., para. 5). All of the Methodist youth supported this view during interviews and observations when they indicated that the Bible should be interpreted, and that they often did so. A statement by the United Methodist Church about having an official version of the Bible stated the following:

The United Methodist Church does not have an "official" version or translation of the Bible. . . . Methodists affirm the usefulness of a number of translations and versions as being helpful for study, teaching, memorization and other purposes, since each sheds a slightly different light in translating or paraphrasing the original languages and manuscripts. . . . Curriculum writers . . . can consult other versions or quote from them when doing so strengthens the teaching resource ("Official version," n.d., para. 1).

This official statement from the Church indicated that that Church did not have an official version of the Bible and that different translations of the Bible provide “slightly different light” on scripture passages, which suggests that there may be some advantage to reading various versions of the Bible. The advice to curriculum writers is also instructive. It stated that they could use various versions of the Bible “when doing so strengthens” the resource they were working on. Both of these statements suggest that the Bible, one’s use of the Bible, and perhaps one’s reading of the Bible may be open to interpretation.

For a more detailed look at Methodists’ views on interpreting the Bible, I turn to another official document, “Reflecting on our Faith.” It stated that Methodists “interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole. . . . [W]e try to discern both the original intention of the text and its meaning for our own faith and life” (n.d., para.5). This statement clearly identified principles to guide interpretation of the Bible. As the youth read scripture (or had scripture read to them) and then engaged in discussions, they may have been participating in a form of biblical interpretation, which was a religious literate practice supported by the Church and this particular congregation.

Beyond using scripture as a means to begin discussions, the Methodist youth in this study who actually knew the Bible stories and could relate them had social currency among their fellow Methodists. Knowing scriptural stories and being able to relate them contributed to one’s status as a knowledge and faithful member of their congregation. Methodist youth and adults commented favorably on the ease with which certain youth used scripture as evidence to support claims, recited passages from scripture, and recounted scriptural events. For example, during one MYF Joshua (Methodist) sat at the front of a small group of his peers, reading from Samuel 17 in the Bible.

Joshua retells the story of David and Goliath. He has a Bible with him. He narrates part of it and reads part of it. He uses three different voices: One for David. One for Goliath. And one for the narrator. The other youth sit quietly, listening, and laughing when appropriate. Joshua looks very comfortable in front of peers. He calls Goliath “the head dog” (Methodist, November 23, 2008).

As Joshua recounted the narrative, his peers whispered to each other, commenting on the fluency with which Joshua retold the story of David and Goliath. “He’s really good,” one youth said. “That was great,” said another. As Joshua finished, he stood up to return to his seat among his peers. A youth sitting next to me breathed softly, “Wow.” The pastor thanked Joshua and said, smiling, “He’s got a career in the ministry.” As I talked with other youth about Joshua’s reading, some of the Methodist youth said that they could never do what Joshua did because they did not know the stories well enough.

When he was younger, Joshua’s friends called him, good-naturedly, “The Bible Geek.” When they got older, religious literacy practices such as this reinforced the social/institutional importance of knowing the events of scripture and being able to recount them. Joshua and others’ knowledge of scripture appeared to provide social currency among religious congregants. For example, because of Joshua’s knowledge of scripture, he was often chosen to talk, preach, or in other ways make public religious presentations. He tells of an experience in Bulgaria when Betsy, the youth minister, in front of a large congregation attending the opening of a new church, suggested that some of the youth come forward to give talks. Betsy looked directly at Joshua. He stepped to the pulpit and delivered a speech. Joshua’s peers and the adult leaders looked to Joshua was a model Methodist youth, in part because he demonstrated a commitment to knowing scriptural narratives. He could, for example, give a religious talk literally at a moment’s notice. This knowledge positioned Joshua, and those who knew the

narratives, as knowledgeable about important subjects, and endowed them with a touch of grace, or an added measure of spirituality, that marked them as committed to a shared religious tradition. In this way, knowing scripture solidified Joshua's membership in religious contexts.

Knowing and being able to relate biblical stories, and using scripture to begin discussions were two important print Discourses for Methodist youth. These print Discourses allowed them to demonstrate their "ways of being" religious through specific religious literate practices. The Latter-day Saint youth also had distinctive ways in which print Discourses allowed them to represent their religious beliefs, values, and practices.

Latter-day Saint Print Discourses. For Latter-day Saint youth, print Discourses allowed them to represent their particular ways of being Latter-day Saint, through the use of scripture. Latter-day Saint youths' use of scripture was marked by three clear cultural values and practices: actually reading scripture, believing what they read, and memorizing scripture. The Latter-day Saint youth in this study established their commitment with other believing Latter-day Saints by actually reading scripture, more or less regularly. One of the marks of the Latter-day Saint youth in the study was their claim to more or less regular personal and/or family scripture study. All of the Latter-day Saint youth in the study stated that they either read scripture every day or nearly every day by themselves and/or that they read scripture every day or nearly every day with their family. As has been identified, Latter-day Saint institutional authorities counseled members to regularly read and study scripture (Bednar, 2009; *Ensign*, 2005; Nelson, 1999; Oaks, 1995; Perry, 1994; *True to the Faith*, 2004). And from what the youth stated, they did. Regular scripture study, for the Latter-day Saint youth in this study, represented social and cultural coherence with the teachings of the Church. Reading scripture regularly also represented the way in which a belief about religious literate practice – that one should read scripture – could transfer into an actual religious literate practice – actually reading scripture.

Analysis of the data suggested that reading scripture was a valued literate practice in seminary. With few exceptions, the youth read aloud passages of scripture each day in seminary. Generally, these readings consisted of several extended passages or entire chapters. Most often, the youth read a verse at a time until all of the verses in the passage were read. Other times, the teacher instructed the youth to read silently. But what were they doing as they read that marked them as engaging in particularly Latter-day Saint print Discourses? I did not observe them over the entire course of a day, but as gathered from interviews and observations, one of the key practices that Latter-day Saint youth engaged in as they read scripture was what I refer to as reading as believing.

As indicated previously, none of the Latter-day Saint youth stated that they disagreed with scripture. Reading as believing represented the religious literacy practice of reading with the *objective* of believing what one read. Reading as believing may have been shaped, as discussed previously, by the Church's teaching on past, present, and future revelation and their conception of scripture as inspired by God, through prophets (Doctrine and Covenants 68:4; *True to the Faith*, 2004). In this way, belief may have shaped practice.

I asked Stephen (Latter-day Saint) if he disagreed with what he read in scripture. He said that he did not, and then explained why. He stated, "[B]ecause [scriptures] are written by prophets of God." In the following excerpt Stephen made another critical step, stating that he read scripture carefully because "I know that the scriptures are from the prophets and the prophets get their words – what they say – from Heavenly Father." Stephen repeated the role that prophets played in his reasons for reading scripture on four occasions, each time stating words to the effect of "scriptures are important because there were written by prophets." If Latter-day Saint youth such as Stephen believed in the reality of prophets, and that prophets wrote scripture, then Stephen may have reasoned that he should read scripture to understand

the words of the prophets, not necessarily to critique their words. Stephen may have indicated as much when he stated that he read scripture because “what the prophets wrote can help you a lot.”

Vincent (Latter-day Saint) made similar claims, stating that Latter-day Saint periodicals like the *Ensign* for adults, or *New Era* for teenagers, contained “all the things that the prophets, like what the prophets continue to give us today.” Vincent continued, saying “combine [those periodicals] with what the prophets of old gave us [in scripture] and that’s a lot of what you need.” Continuing with the importance of prophets, Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) stated that the semi-annual General Conference of the Church was “important [because] it’s a chance to hear from the prophet of our Church and the apostles, who have direct communication with God and are able to tell us their revelations.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches the continuity of revelation (Article of Faith 9) and that the words of prophets and apostles are scripture, or “the will of the Lord . . . the mind of the Lord . . . the word of the Lord . . . [and] the voice of the Lord” (Doctrine and Covenants 68:4). As such, Priscilla’s statement about hearing the prophet and the apostles – who have “direct communication with God” – talk about their revelations may have been an opportunity to hear the word of God, which she suggested was important. Stephen, Vincent, and Priscilla’s statements represent how a cultural belief in the importance of prophets and their ability to know and proclaim the mind and will of God can shape the practice of reading scripture, in this case, reading with the intent to believe what they read.

A third way in which Latter-day Saint youth engaged in print Discourses was by memorizing scripture. Each day in seminary the youth spent five to ten minutes working on their scripture mastery passages. As identified in Chapter Four, seminary teachers were to “emphasize the mastery of key scriptural passages and help students understand and explain

the doctrines and principles contained in those passages” (Teaching Emphasis, 2009). These passages included key doctrines that the Church wanted every member to know. For each of the four years of seminary the Church identified 25 passages that the youth were to understand and memorize. If youth attended all four years of seminary, then they could have memorized 100 verses of scripture by the time they graduated from high school. The teachers in this class spent time each day working on scripture mastery passages. They even placed a chart on the wall so that youth could chart their progress memorizing the passages. As the seminary year drew to a close all but two of the 13 youth who attended regularly had memorized all 25 passages, as indicated by the chart. One way that the youth attempted to memorize scripture was by playing the Slap Game (Latter-day Saint, December 3, 2008).

To play the game, the youth sat in a circle with both hands palms up on either side of them. The game moved to the right. To begin a student said the first word of the reference and correspondingly hit his neighbor’s left hand with his own left hand. The neighbor then said the next word of the reference and hit her neighbor’s left hand with her own left hand. This continued until the circle had recited the reference and the passage, word for word. The student who had to say the last word of the passage needed to slap his neighbor’s hand before his neighbor pulled it away. If he slapped it, the neighbor was out (if he missed, the slapper was out). The game continued until one person remained. The youth appeared to enjoy this game. They laughed, screamed, and smiled as they played. The Slap Game is one example of the way Latter-day Saint youth in this study tried to memorize scripture during seminary. The effort they put forth may have represented to their peers their commitment to the beliefs, values, and practices of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was another way that Latter-day Saint youth represented their ways of being religious in the world through print Discourses.

Another print Discourse closely related to reading scripture was applying scripture. I subsume both denominations into a single discussion of applying scripture because I could discern few appreciable differences between the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth in terms of the importance of applying scripture or their methods of doing so.

Applying Scripture. Beyond learning about and using scripture, youth from both denominations sought to understand scripture as it related to the contexts of their everyday lives by *applying* scripture; that is, Latter-day Saint and Methodist sought to live the principles and lessons that they learned through their study of scripture. Applying scripture demonstrated that youth felt that they should not simply learn about scripture, but that they should live according to it. Therefore, application of scripture helped youth live in ways compatible with their deeply held religious beliefs, which was inseparably connected with the construction of particular identities as faithful members of their religious traditions. All of the youth in this study indicated to some degree the notion of applying scripture when they used phrases such as “living our standards,” “see what [scripture] means to me,” or talked about how scripture related to them.

For Sarah (Methodist), applying scripture was the intent of scripture. She said that “the Bible provides stories and explanations that are intended to be applied to Christians’ everyday lives.” And that is what she tried to do. After Sarah found “a message” in scripture, she went about “incorporating it and taking advantage of it in my own life.” Similarly, Jennifer (Methodist) believed that “what makes [scripture] special . . . is that you get to relate it to your life. So, you take it and you make yourself a part of it.” For the youth, scripture related to them. Jennifer said that she could become “part of it.” This idea of making one’s self part of scripture by applying it suggests the intimate nature of the relationship some of the youth had with scripture. Indeed,

because they sought to live their lives according to what they learned from scripture many of the youth understood themselves in relationship to scripture.

For many of the youth, applying scripture was the process of becoming a certain type of person and living a certain type of life as a faithful member of a religious tradition. Samantha (Latter-day Saint) said that when one read scripture, particularly accounts of the lives of prophets, one should “wonder what you can do be like [them].” Comparing scripture with other texts Jennifer (Methodist) said, “Reading something from like scripture, it’s more like, you know, it kind of helps shape who you are. . . . It changes you.” Many of the youth seemed to accept and anticipate the possibility of scripture shaping who they were. Every class I observed in both denominations, for example, began and ended with prayer, with some version of “please help us learn and apply today’s lesson” as the most often repeated request.

Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) had this to say about applying lessons from scripture:

[T]here’s important things in scriptures that you can get out of it. So that helps to kind of show you [that] you should try to be like this person, or you should do this thing. It will show you how to get to where you want to be.

Scripture appeared to change these youth, showing them who they “should try to be like” and what they should do in order to get “where you want to be.” To many of them, getting where they wanted meant that they had to live their faith more surely. Learning and living their beliefs was a fundamental part of being the good Christians that they wanted to be. I asked Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) for an example of a time he felt he needed to be like a particular person from scripture or do a particular thing. He provided the following example:

Jonathan: Well, in Mosiah [in the Book of Mormon] when king Benjamin gives his speech he kind of says some commandments you should do. And so, that’s some things.

ER: So you felt that you needed to do the things that king Benjamin asked his people to do?

Jonathan: Yeah, I feel that those things are important to do them, even though I don't have to, I feel like I should.

ER: Why is that?

Jonathan: [Laugh]. Because I think they're important. They can help me improve.

The last question, "Why is that?" seemed to surprise Jonathan. Perhaps he felt that the reason he should do the things king Benjamin asked was self-evident: they would help him improve. Improving dealt with being a better member of his faith as demonstrated by faithfully learning and applying lessons from scripture. Sometimes youth looked to their peers for help living according to their religious beliefs and cultural practices. The relationship between two Methodist youth, Kate and Melinda, is a case in point.

Simply put, Kate's peers admired her. They admired her knowledge of scripture, ability to pray on demand, and the way she lived her life as an open, God-loving Christian. Leading a discussion about making decisions, a teacher talked about the "voice of God" helping youth make good decisions. The teacher asked, "What's in your head [helping you make good decisions]?" Melinda said, "I have full conversations with Kate's voice. . . . [She's] in my head. Kate's voice comes in and says, 'Melinda, is this a good decision?'" (Methodist, February 1, 2009). For Melinda, Kate was a model of Methodism's social and cultural practices. Kate, for example, knew scripture, and as measured by her peers, did a good job of living its teachings; so much so that Melinda felt that she needed Kate's influence so that she could more fully engage in the cultural religious practices of her faith. For Melinda, the practice of carrying on mental conversations with Kate suggests that social relationships helped her, and perhaps other youth, approximate cultural practices and apply religious principles, to become the types of people

they wanted to be. For many of the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth, learning and living by scripture were important parts of a larger cultural pattern of becoming committed and knowledgeable members of their religious traditions. Overall, scripture reading was closely tied to social and cultural commitments of learning about and applying one's religious beliefs and practices and being a faithful member of one's religious tradition.

Oral Discourses: Oral Cultures of Learning

Oral Discourses provided a way for youth from both denominations to present their religious "ways of being in the world" through talk. In addition to print Discourses, oral Discourses were a highly valued literate practice in religious contexts. Print and oral Discourses could work together to develop one's religious knowledge. Oral Discourses represented particular ways of talking in religious contexts to share one's knowledge or experiences, make personal connections to the material under study, demonstrate one's skill with oral literacy practices, express one's opinions or interpretation of religious content, and demonstrate one's ability to participate appropriately in religious social practices. For the youth in this study, oral Discourses were an important part of a larger cultural pattern of learning about one's religion. Although religious contexts for both denominations were "intentional learning environments," (Poveda, Cano, and Palomares-Valera, 2005, p.88), the specific cultural patterns within the two denominations were quite distinct. Methodists, for example, aimed to learn what scripture *meant* through a culture of oral interpretation. Latter-day Saints aimed to learn what scripture *said* through a culture of listening.

A Culture of Interpretation. A culture of interpretation draws attention to the active nature of the Methodist youths' oral involvement, and was represented by on-going oral analyses used to understand the meaning or importance of religious content, principles, or events. This was important for Methodist youth because "if you're going to get down to the

truth [in scripture] – you have to interpret it” (Daniel). The Methodists’ culture of interpretation aligned with their literate practices of reading and discussing identified in Chapter Six. Analyses helped identify this congregation’s culture of oral interpretation, but my outsider status also helped. Because I was not a member of this particular congregation and the cultural practices that I observed as part of this study were so distinctive from what I observed in the Latter-day Saint religious contexts, this culture of interpretation became more prominent for me. I was intrigued by the regular opportunities that the youth had in religious contexts to engage in discussions. I was also intrigued by the depth of many of the Methodist youths’ discussions around scripture, principles, or ideas, and how freely many of them seemed to engage in these discussions.

Analyses of interviews and observations suggest that the Methodist youths’ involvement in a culture of interpretation was influenced by frequent oral participation in worship services. In Sunday worship services, for example, congregants participated orally in a number of ways. They sang songs, stood and orally welcomed people sitting near them, and participated in antiphonal prayers, scripture reading, and programs such as Evening Vespers. Congregants also orally participated in unison prayers and ordinances such as baptism and confirmation by stating they would help individuals remain faithful. Although much of this oral involvement was limited, it demonstrated the importance of members’ oral participation in religious contexts, which contributed to the culture of interpretation by providing a space in which words – of congregants – were a welcome and necessary part of religious and literate practices. During MYF and other activities one way Methodist youth participated in a culture of interpretation was through discussions.

One MYF session, for example, began with the youth quietly watching a 15 minute video featuring Rob Bell, a popular Christian pastor, entitled “Breathe.” The video, professionally

produced, was set in a subway station. Soft music played in the background. The narrator, Rob, asked, “Is the name of God the sound of breathing?” As directed, when the video ended, the youth broke into small groups. The following field note excerpt demonstrates how the youth analyzed the video and the guiding questions through a typical discussion. This was a group of five youth and two adults.

Melinda has a set of questions in her hands. She asks: “If breathing means God, and we swear? That’s bad.” [A male youth] talks about running. He says that as a runner he works on oxygen deficiency. He talks about learning to breathe in as much as you can and training yourself to not need to think about breathing while you’re running. Melinda says that when you can do something without thinking about it, it’s called “the flow.” Sarah calls it “muscle memory.” She connects it to crew, sharing with the group some of the training that she and her teammates do to prepare their bodies to do certain things in efficient ways without having to think about it. The group talks about “flow” for several minutes.

One of the adult counselors reminds the group that 99% of our energy should come from our breathing – she’s repeating a statement from the video. [The same male youth] talks about running again. Sarah says that she and some of the other crew members are learning yoga to help them with their breathing. She says that having a rhythm in their breathing while they’re in awkward positions helps. [Another male youth] who doesn’t talk much in church makes a comment on breathing. Sarah connects to [his] comment, continuing the conversation. She says that in crew the point is to hold on to your breath until later in the race. She says that you should breathe through your

nose and then at the end breathe through your mouth to get an extra boost! She uses her arms to emphasize the word *boost*.

Another one of the adult counselors says, "I hadn't thought about [breathing] in terms of athletics before." [The first male youth who talked about running] talks about breathing in sync with one's jumps when running the hurdles. Melinda asks, "If the name of God is the sound of breathing, how does that change the way you view yourself as a living being?" Sarah announces, "I got one: CPR!" She looks very pleased with herself. She says, "I'm done for tonight." Melinda and Sarah give each other a high five. Sarah builds on her CPR theme, explaining that breathing reminds her of God and that when she talks to others, the words she uses are "the breath of God." She says, "When I breathe, I breathe *in* God." (Methodist, March 1, 2009).

The youth in this excerpt engaged with each other around the topic of "breathe" for over fifteen minutes. This discussion was clearly a sharing of ideas and possibilities, an example of "people talking back-and-forth [in order to] understand what that person is thinking" (Alex, Methodist). The purpose of these discussions, as one Methodist youth said, was "not to prove who's right or wrong, but to get others' opinions" (Joshua). And the discussions appeared to do that. Although not captured verbatim, the Methodist youth's comments during discussions such as this were often extended, multi-sentence responses that explored possible meanings by offering interpretations and making connections to their own experiences. In these discussions youth shared their own knowledge and opinions, and may have developed knowledge through talking with each other. Many of them, for example, shared their knowledge of sports such as running and crew by making statements about running techniques and training repertoires. Also, participants appeared to be influenced by these conversations, as exemplified by their

statements about developing new knowledge. One said, “I hadn’t thought about that [before].” Additionally, Sarah seemed very pleased with the new insight she gained through the discussion when she made her statement about CPR and then said, “I’m done for the night,” indicating, somewhat in jest, that perhaps their discussion (and the whole night) had been a success. In this culture of interpretation, discussions such as this were typical, and were reinforced through constant probing of youths’ thoughts about topics, events, and principles, and by youth building upon their peers’ ideas. The Latter-day Saint youths’ oral Discourses, however, were focused more on listening than on talking.

A Culture of Listening. A culture of listening draws attention to the limited nature of Latter-day Saint youths’ oral involvement. The youths’ oral involvement was represented by short and infrequent oral participation in religious contexts. Teachers often attributed these youths’ limited oral participation to the youth being tired so early in the morning, but digging deeper into other cultural practices involving teaching and learning suggests that it may have been a cultural phenomenon. During the one-hour congregational worship services on Sundays, for example, Latter-day Saint youth listened to speakers. Their oral participation was limited to singing and saying, “Amen” after a prayer or talk. The same situation was represented during the occasional nightly religious gatherings called firesides. Attendees – youth and adults – sat in the pews of the chapel and listened to the speakers. This structure was also typical of the semi-annual church-wide General Conference in which general authorities of the church spoke for 4-6 hours on each of the Conference’s two days. Attendees sat and listened. Even in more intimate settings such as gatherings with the youth and congregational leaders at a leader’s home, the culture of listen prevailed. On one such occasion a youth said, “The bishop just talked.” I asked if any of the youth participated. The youth said, “No. We just listened” (Jonathan, Latter-day Saint).

As a life-long practicing Latter-day Saint I observed and participated in this culture of listening well before the beginning of this study. The similarities of my own experiences with a culture of listening were some of the motivations that drove me to explore this issue more deeply. As a high school student, for example, I attended seminary for four years. For the most part I sat and listened, and offered few responses to teachers' questions. As a researcher I was, therefore, interested in exploring this culture that seemed to resonate with my own experiences, and appeared to influence these youths' religious literate practices.

In this study, the Latter-day Saint youth were rarely asked questions that solicited interpretation of scripture or principles. When teachers did ask questions, youth often responded in two ways: silence or with "Sunday school answers." On numerous occasions after reading a passage aloud in class teachers asked youth questions, which the youth did not answer. The teachers asked literal questions such as, "What did the Lord say to Peter?" They also, on occasion, asked interpretive questions such as, "What might this have meant to Peter?" To many of these questions, the youth said nothing, as demonstrated in the following field note excerpt:

The teacher says that he wants to review the book of Acts [which they finished reading yesterday]. He asks the class for a summary. Nobody answers. The teacher asks what they learned yesterday about Paul. Nobody answers. The teacher asks again. Nobody answers. As directed by the teacher they go to Acts and read some of the chapter headings of the last few chapters. The teacher asks "What about Paul makes the Jews want to kill him?" Nobody responds (Latter-day Saint, March 6, 2009).

This excerpt is typical of the literal questions asked and the youths' responses. Often, Latter-day Saint youth simply did not speak when asked questions, even after they had just completed reading aloud a passage as a class. As mentioned previously, Sophia attributed this to

a culture of non-speaking: “It’s just known that we don’t talk much,” she said. “Everyone knows that. Our teachers tell us that.” This was not isolated to seminary. In Sunday worship services the same phenomenon appeared to occur. Sophia (Latter-day Saint) reported that “it’s a little worse [at church] because we talk less at church.” According to Sophia, even substitute teachers stated that the youth did not participate orally in lessons.

When youth did respond to teachers’ questions, they often limited their responses to short statements they called “Sunday school answers.” Latter-day Saint youth appeared to have managed their responses in such a way as to limit their own speaking. For example, when invited to engage in discussions Latter-day Saint youth often relied on the “tried and true” responses such as “scriptures, or God, or prayer, or stuff like that [which] fit a lot of questions” (Stephen). Youth may have called these Sunday school answers because (a) youth learned them early – in Sunday school – and, (b) they represented fundamental principles valued in the church. In practice, these answers often limited Latter-day Saint youths’ responses. They allowed youth to engage in discussions in an institutionally appropriate way without expending much mental effort, as noted in the following excerpt from a seminary class:

Teacher: Who warns for the Lord?

Youth: Prophets.

Teacher: Who warns for the Lord?

Vincent: Anybody. It just depends what they’re over. Only the prophet could warn the whole church. Your father could say, “You should probably do this, so you’ll be safe.”

Teacher: We’re all supposed to raise our voice of warning. Why? What are we warning against?

Laura: Sin.

Teacher: Okay. What sins are we warning people against? Why are we trying to keep people from sinning?

Male Youth: It's safer. The commandments exist because sins are not going to help you.

Teacher: What are we also warning against? Priscilla, what would others benefit from knowing?

Priscilla: [Sleeping].

Teacher: [Repeats question: What would others benefit from knowing?]

Vincent: Holy Ghost.

Teacher: The Holy Ghost is a personal companion who can warn us in our own lives.

Paul: Word of wisdom.

Teacher: The Holy Ghost is important. Think of the plan of salvation (Latter-day Saint, March 6, 2009).

With the exception of Vincent's response, youths' responses in this excerpt were limited, often to a word or two. The responses represented the Sunday school answers of prophets, sin, keep the commandments, Holy Ghost, and Word of Wisdom.³¹ Attention to the questions that the teacher asked suggests that youths' Sunday school responses may have been part of a larger culture that valued knowing content; that is to say that youth and adults may have felt that some questions had clear answers and that they knew what some of those answers might be. The questions in this excerpt did not allow youth to provide in-depth responses, limiting what they could say. Yet, even when offered interpretive questions, youth

³¹ The Word of Wisdom is the Latter-day Saint code of health that indicates what is and is not acceptable to eat and drink, and the promises attached to following the code. Living in compliance with this code influences many aspects of a Latter-day Saint's lifestyle. It is found in the Latter-day Saint scripture, Doctrine and Covenants, section 89.

often responded in similar ways. Youth knew that teachers would not directly challenge a Sunday school answer's value or accuracy; however, teachers did not always approve of these responses. On one occasion a teacher challenged a youth to develop her Sunday school responses. It appeared uncomfortable for the young girl and her peers.

The young woman came to the front of the room to present her devotional – a short, spiritual message offered at the beginning of seminary. Typically, these messages lasted about 15 seconds. The youth identified her favorite talk from a recent church-wide conference, and in one sentence said why she liked it. Most youth devotionals ended there, but this time the teacher pushed her.

Teacher: Why is this important for you?

Youth: [Inaudible response.]

Teacher: Why is this important for us?

[Youth responds in a sentence about the importance of going to church.]³²

Teacher: What blessings come from church?

[Youth responds in a sentence.]

Teacher: What have you gotten out of church?

[Youth responds in a sentence] (Latter-day Saint, November 19, 2008).

This devotional lasted 65 seconds, more than four times the length of the typical devotional, and with much more detail. Although this young woman was more taciturn than her peers, her brief responses were representative of some of her peers' responses. Interestingly, as this youth's peers watched her respond to the teacher's questions they appeared to grow uneasy. Some fidgeted in their seats. Others looked around the room nervously.

³² This young woman was not an active participant in the study; therefore, I provide only a limited account of her responses to protect her identity.

Overall, oral Discourses were important parts of larger cultural practices of learning, but they looked very different in both congregations. For example, due to Latter-day Saint youths' limited oral involvement in religious contexts Latter-day Saint teachers did most of the talking. Youth listened, orally participating in limited ways. Methodist youths' oral participation was nested in a culture of interpretation wherein the youth demonstrated they were comfortable using discussions to share and develop knowledge and opinions. These oral Discourses provided the youth from both denominations culturally appropriate ways of engaging in religious literacy practices, in this case through talk.

Written Discourses: A Culturally Informed Note and Journal Writing

Written discourses were rarely, if ever, practiced in the religious contexts I observed. With one exception of a timeline Latter-day Saint youth drew, and a short writing exercise youth in both denominations were not instructed or expected to write in religious contexts; however, my observations and analyses indicated that written Discourses were important parts of some of the youths' lives. Indeed, for some youth from both denominations, writing may have signaled their entrance into a social world where they could develop and use different literate practices to make sense of their lives and religion. Data collected from both denominations indicated that youth who wrote well could identify themselves as committed members of their religious tradition, demonstrate their willingness to participate in certain religious activities, and win the admiration of peers and adults. Moreover, writing provided another way for the youth to represent their religion and religious selves by giving them tools to take social positions in the world consistent with their beliefs. For the Methodists, these Discourses were often practiced outside of religious contexts, for use *in* religious contexts. For some of the Latter-day Saint youth, writing Discourses were primarily self-directed and practiced outside of religious

contexts. For youth from both denominations, the written Discourses I observed were closely tied to religious cultures, values, and literate practices.

Methodist Written Discourses. For Methodist youth, speeches or prayers were the most common type of written Discourse. They represented one way social and cultural forces of Methodism influenced the way in which these youth participated in the world. Speeches and prayers were written outside of religious contexts for use within religious contexts, and they were always written at the request of a Methodist Church leader. Analyses of interviews and observations indicated that all of the Methodist youth in this study either presented speeches or prayers in religious contexts during the course of the study or talked about the role of speeches or prayers in their religious experiences. In this section, I present an example of a prayer Daniel (Methodist) wrote for delivery at a congregational worship service. I also provide an example of a culturally-informed note shared between Sarah and Amy. These examples demonstrate some of the written Discourses practices by the youth in this Methodist congregation. I begin with Daniel's prayer.

One of the pastors asked Daniel (Methodist) to pray during a congregational worship service one summer. It was typical in this Methodist congregation for individuals to compose prayers for public delivery. Daniel wrote and delivered a 500-word prayer, which was striking for its focus on the relationships he saw that individuals had with each other and with God. He called for the listeners "as a whole community to remember that we are all created in the image of our Lord." To demonstrate the collective human bonds, Daniel wrote of the importance of service, coming together in "the Spirit of humanity," and overcoming trials by relying on God and others. Daniel stated that it was "our relationships to You, and the ones around us that is most vital." These connections, Daniel said, helped individuals realize that "we are capable of facing anything." These connections also allowed people to "grow in the community." Over half

(11) of the 20 sentences in the prayer referenced individuals' connections with others or with God. Daniel's prayer was rich with cultural messages valued in this Methodist congregation where much attention was given to developing and maintaining social relations with fellow members. For example, a social gathering followed Sunday congregational services, members were active in a various committees throughout the Church, and the adult leaders tried to create a safe social space for the youth to learn (Chapter Five). This attention to relationships was also manifest in a note that Sarah received from Amy.

During a Methodist religious retreat, Sarah received a note from Amy, hand-written in red pen on lined paper. Religious retreats were important events for many of the youth. Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth participated in them and talked favorably about them. At one retreat Amy and Sarah "supported each other" in their personal and relational struggles. Before they parted, Amy gave the following note to Sarah. Analyses of the note indicate that it contained culturally mediated values and beliefs. The note was not representative of the written Discourses I observed during the study, but it is a good example of how something as ostensibly simple as a note passed between friends could be imbued with rich cultural messages. Although I did not observe note-passing during the study, Sarah assured me that she and her peers at church often exchanged notes. This note, then, may be a more common representation of a written Discourse than my data suggest. The note read as follows:

SARAH

baby girl [heart]

woah you are crazy cool & so open minded. I am so looking forward to building a relationship up with God like yours. you make all the bad times good (solo challenge). i look up to you in so many ways. your outlook on life is so refreshing and powerful to me

to see. you are so beautiful inside and out. you shine baby [heart] one day you will find that man that completes you and you know it will happen when god is ready.

i love you

[heart] Amy

This note expressed why Amy admired Sarah. Amy wrote that she admired Sarah's coolness, open-mindedness, relationship with God, making bad times good (during the Solo Challenge),³³ as well as Sarah's refreshing outlook on life, her beauty (inside and out), and what may be her (shining) countenance. With the exception of "crazy cool" all of the characteristics Amy admired about Sarah were grounded in a shared understanding of favorable qualities of particular religious individuals. Amy may have known what to look for in Sarah and what she was supposed to admire about her because they shared a religious culture that indicated which qualities were most valued in individuals who were, or claimed to be, religious. Stating that Amy admired Sarah's open-mindedness, for example, may have been rooted in the shared cultural belief and practice of accepting others into the Church. The Methodist's motto – Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors. – reflected this spirit of acceptance. Stating that she admired Sarah for being open-minded, Amy indicated that Sarah was accepting of others, which coincided with core beliefs about being a Methodist. Moreover, Amy wrote that she admired Sarah's relationship with God, which was very important for many of the Methodist youth. Youth sought to develop this relationship by living in accordance with their understanding of God's will for them. By stating she admired Sarah for her relationship with God, Amy indicated that she knew this was important and that Sarah was living in a valued way relative to her religious beliefs and God.

³³ During the Solo Challenge youth – attached to a harness – climbed up a 25-30 foot pole and jumped to a trapeze bar. Amy was terrified and only made it through because of Sarah's encouragement.

Making “bad times good” had reference to the Solo Challenge in which Sarah helped Amy overcome her fears and take the leap from the top of a 30 foot pole onto a trapeze bar. Sarah said that Amy was “terrified by heights; she was shaking, crying and just absolutely terrified.” For Amy, the experience with the Solo Challenge may have captured the importance of service and patience in relationships. By stating that Sarah could make bad times good during such a difficult experience, Amy indicated that Sarah was a service-oriented and patient person. Amy also indicated that these qualities could turn challenges into blessings, as they did for Amy during the Solo Challenge, which, thanks to Sarah, gave Amy “a chance . . . to really see what she could accomplish (realistically and metaphorically).”

Amy also wrote that she admired Sarah because she was “so beautiful inside and out.” She told Sarah, “you shine baby.” These statements may reference the belief that one’s internal state can manifest physically through, for example, one’s countenance. Writing that Sarah was beautiful inside and out may have indicated that Sarah was living what she claimed to believe and that Sarah’s internal state was of a particular quality that made her “shine,” which Amy admired.

Amy’s note not only showed that Amy appreciated Sarah, but it expressed encouragement for Sarah by stating that Sarah would successfully “find a man that completes you.” Amy put this relational success in the context of God’s timetable, stating that it would “happen when God is ready.” This may have encouraged Sarah to keep looking for the right man, but to remember that other forces, such as God’s will, may be at play in her life. Believing that there was a God and that God was involved in their lives may have helped some of the youth see that there was a divine element in worthy, worldly pursuits such as relationships. Moreover, believing that God played an important role in their lives may have connected some of the youth with divinity. It was, therefore, important that Amy included a statement about

things happening “when God is ready” because it may have been a source of peace and comfort, closely tied to beliefs about how things worked – or should work – in the world.

In sum, Amy’s note captured a number of cultural beliefs and practices of Methodist youth. It may be the case that only one well-versed in this culture could write a note like this and understand its place in the Methodist youth culture of this congregation. The culturally-grounded overtures of admiration and encouragement expressed in Amy’s note turned out to be a highly effective way of developing a relationship. Sarah said of Amy after their experience at the retreat, “I love that girl.” Indeed, Amy’s note may have marked a turning point in the girls’ relationship by drawing them together. Reflecting on the importance of the note in developing relationships, Sarah said, “When someone gives you something from their heart, you should hold onto it and never forget it.” And that may have been what Sarah tried to do by keeping the note safe, in her Bible, for years.

Written Discourses, such as this note and Daniel’s prayer, are examples of the ways in which some of the youth from this Methodist congregation could identify themselves as part of specific social and cultural communities and knowledgeable about specific literate practices within those communities. These Discourses could also provide some of the youth with the cultural knowledge and opportunities to take social positions consistent with their deeply held beliefs and values, such as open-mindedness. Moreover, by using culturally specific knowledge as a tool, written Discourses could help youth develop relationships with their peers, and perhaps with God, both of which appeared to be highly valued for many of the Methodist youth in this study.

Latter-day Saint Written Discourses. For Latter-day Saint youth, journal writing was the most common written Discourse. It marked one way the cultural forces of Mormonism influenced the way in which these youth engaged with the world through writing. Six of the

Latter-day Saint youth stated that they kept a journal more or less regularly. To those who did not state that they kept a journal, I asked specifically if they did. Their responses indicated that they felt they should be keeping a journal. Timothy (Latter-day Saint) stated, “I’m going to start eventually. I told myself I was going to start when I was twelve but it really hasn’t happened.” Jonah (Latter-day Saint) said that people had told him to keep a journal, but he never did. Stephen (Latter-day Saint) said, “Maybe I should [keep a journal].” These responses suggest the shared notion among these Latter-day Saint youth of the importance of keeping a journal. Even if some of them decided not to do it, they stated that they felt that they should. In terms of why they kept a journal, the most common response (reported by five Latter-day Saint youth) was to remember.

Jonathan (Latter-day Saint), for example, wanted to remember, and be remembered. He said that he wrote in his journal because it was “sometimes fun to go back and read what I wrote. . . . [To] look back [on], like what my life was like back then.” He stated that he kept a journal so that he could read his previous entries and remember what his life was like. Jonathan elaborated by talking about remembering his own experiences reading other peoples’ journals. He stated, “[O]nce in awhile I’ll like read something about one of my ancestors or something, or like a story they have. Since they wrote that down, I know about it.” These two statements about remembering his life and reading about his ancestor’s life came together in Jonathan’s next statement. He said, “So, if something cool like that happens to me, and I can write that down so people can know about it. . . . [P]eople can read it, like after you’ve died.” Keeping a journal, for Jonathan, was about remembering his own experiences, and providing a means through which others could remember his experiences. Journaling for Jonathan, therefore, appeared to be about remembering, and being remembered. Timothy (Latter-day Saint) made similar statements in an interview when he said he would keep a journal in the future to

“remember what happened in my past. . . . [I]t will be useful eventually.” I asked him how keeping a journal would be useful. He said, “So, I can bore my kids with stories of my childhood.” Although Timothy’s response about boring his children may have been in jest, it captured a sentiment very similar to Jonathan’s about writing to be remembered.

Sophia and Vincent (Latter-day Saints) were more explicit about the things that they wanted to remember by writing in their journals. For both of them, spiritual issues were important. Sophia kept two journals. She called one her “regular journal” and the other her “scripture journal.” In her regular journal, Sophia wrote about “things that happened today.” Her scripture journal included, “spiritual stuff,” things “like discoveries or problems that were solved that day.” She referred to these problems on another occasion as “spiritual conflict[s].” When I asked Vincent about writing in his journal he said that he wrote, “If big things happen.” He continued, stating, “I know during EFY I usually write every day. . . . At EFY everything is a big thing.”³⁴ I asked him why he wrote in his journal. He said, “I think it actually helps to solidify what I believe.” He also said that he wrote in his journal to record how he has “grow . . . like spiritually as a person.” Sophia and Vincent stated that they wrote about important spiritual experiences and conflicts in their journals. For them, these experiences were worth remembering. Sophia, Vincent, and their peers’ interest in remember was not without cultural connections.

I interpreted these youths’ interest in remembering and being remembered as influenced by the Church’s interest in researching and connecting with their relatives through genealogical work. None of the youth indicated that they actively participated in genealogy; however, an analysis of course material that these youth may have encountered during religious

³⁴ EFY, or Especially for Youth, is a summer religious retreat for Latter-day Saint youth. EFY is held at the local level around the country. Several sessions are also held at a central location on and around the campus of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah (“Especially for youth programs,” n.d.).

instruction indicated a number of lessons about journaling that were related to genealogy (“Journals,” n.d.; “Personal journals,” n.d.). Interestingly, each of the lessons suggested journaling as a way to engage in genealogy and included suggestions for using genealogical software and websites. One lesson stated, “One of the best goals you can set is to keep a journal” (“My personal journal,” n.d., para.1). Keeping a journal was often framed as creating a “personal history.” On one occasion a woman in the local congregation who was known for her frequent journaling visited a class in which a number of the youth in this study were attending. The class was about ways to engage in genealogical work. Some of the Latter-day Saint youth may have been referring to these experiences when they stated that they kept journals because they had lessons about doing it in church (Samantha and Timothy). I cannot claim that these experiences with learning about personal histories resulted in the youth keeping journals, but it is one indication that at the institutional and local levels journaling, or keeping “personal histories,” as a means of connecting with the past and the future was important.

As used here, Gee’s (1996, 1999) notion of Discourses provided a way to identify the cultural influences that shaped the way youth connected with the world through religious literate practices. Discoursed demonstrated how scripture reading, along with talking and writing were related to some of the larger cultural patterns in these youths’ religious traditions. Specifically, in this section I demonstrated that Discourses provided the youth ways of practicing their religious literacies in culturally appropriate ways for culturally appropriate reasons through print, speech, and writing.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter focused on religious youths’ literate practices. It illustrated Methodist and Latter-day Saint youths’ views of sacred texts and the importance and difficulty of scripture in their lives and literate practices. This chapter also identified the valued practices of reading,

talking, and writing, how they were taken up in religious contexts, and the social and cultural influences that informed these practices. Having presented the youths' literate practices, we may now turn to the motivations for these practices. Recall that the theoretical model guiding this study has a number of interlocking components: reader, text, and context. As mentioned previously, these elements of the model are not entire separate; rather, they overlap with one another to influence individuals' motivation for literacy learning. In the next chapter I continue the focus on scripture by presenting the qualities of scripture that motivated youth for literacy.

Chapter 7

Textual Factors that Motivate Religious Youth for Literacy

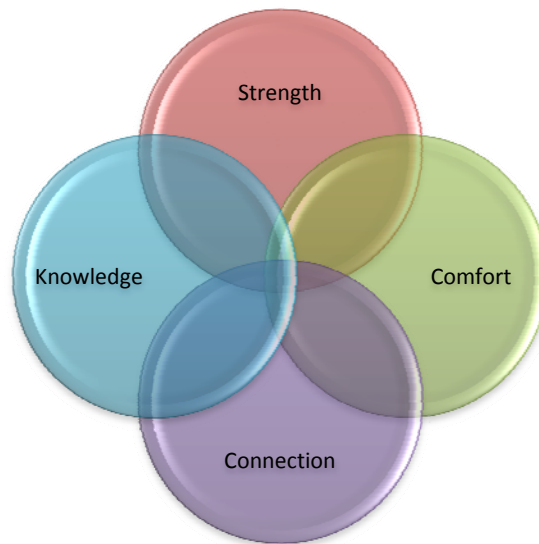
The previous chapter identified the place of scripture in the youths' lives and the literate practices that the youth engaged in, as influenced by their social and culture practices. This chapter continues to explore the place of scripture in the youths' lives by providing an in-depth look at the youths' motivations for reading their sacred texts. As with much of this work, it is difficult to completely separate the reader from the text, and the context. As such, the qualities identified here were not found *in* scripture, per se; rather, they arose from youths' interaction with scripture. This interaction is represented in the reader, text, context theoretical model that guides this study by the overlapping spheres at the center of the model. Although the focus of this chapter is the textual qualities that motivated the youth for literacy, the extant interaction between texts and youth suggests how connected these two were in terms of motivation. Because they had experienced a lifetime of reading and valuing scripture as a source of guidance, comfort, and inspiration, these youth saw scripture as providing them (a) *knowledge* for how to live their lives, (b) *strength* to endure challenges, (c) *comfort* during stressful times, and (d) a *connection* to God (Figure 7.1). I focus on one characteristic at a time.

“[I] get a message . . . and try and apply that”: Learning and Applying Scripture

The Latter-day Saint core standards for seminary teaching stated one of the goals of seminary was to help students “understand and apply gospel doctrines and principles” (Teaching Emphasis, 2009). For Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth, learning and applying were inextricably linked. All of the youth from both denominations identified the significance of

understanding scripture and applying it to their lives as important elements that motivated them to read scripture. I could not identify clear denominational variations in the youths' conceptions of learning from or applying scripture. I, therefore, present their responses jointly in this section.

Figure 7.1: Textual Characteristics that Motivate for Literacy



The youths' motivations for learning and applying scripture appear to be connected to the dual cultural beliefs that (a) scripture contained important knowledge that would (b) help them become the people they wanted to be. Therefore, knowing what scripture said and applying that to one's life became critical for the youth. Making the connection between learning, applying, and motivation, Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) said in an interview, "I base the way I live on the teachings of my religion, so I have to know what they are." Priscilla appeared to be motivated to study scripture so that she could learn about her religion, which allowed her to "live . . . the teachings." She stated that she often read and studied scripture until "I . . . find something in it that I can directly apply to my life." Daniel (Methodist) characterized the importance of learning and applying scripture by stating that it was "something to consume and

live with.” Priscilla and Daniel’s peers in this study appeared to agree with them as evidenced by similar comments about the value of scripture from all of the other participants.

“I read [scripture] to learn”: Learning from Scripture

Every Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth talked explicitly about the importance of learning from scripture. They indicated that they learned different things, but in one way or another, learning was an important motivation for all of the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth except perhaps Jonah (Latter-day Saint) and Melinda (Methodist). Melinda stated that when she read scripture, “I learned a little bit,” but she did not talk about it as extensively as did her peers in this study. Jonah stated that he tried “to remember what I’m reading” when he read scripture, but went no further. Most of the youth from both denominations stated that they read scripture to learn. Some, like Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) and Sarah (Methodist), even stated that they read and struggled through scripture voluntarily *until* they felt that they learned something important. Knowing that they had learned (and would continue to learn) from scripture may have motivated the youth to engage with scripture.

Learning from scripture was consistent with the cultural importance both denominations placed on scripture (Chapter Six). Their respective denominations taught that scripture was inspired by God and that it should be revered, and studied. Indeed, when others referred to scripture in religious contexts, the message to youth was that scripture was vital to their religious traditions. And it was. For the Methodist tradition, scripture is “the source of . . . faith” and “the true rule and guide for faith and practice” (“Reflecting on our Faith,” n.d., para.11). As such, knowing scriptural teachings was a fundamental component of one’s Christianity. As the UMC website states, scripture, meaning the Bible, was “our sacred canon.” It is the source of truth that provided “meaning for our own faith and life.” For Latter-day Saints, scripture was a guiding force in their lives. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

teaches that scripture is inspired by God and that God continues to speak. As such, the Church has an open canon; one that includes scripture written before and after the Bible. Scripture, therefore, is a relevant and timely source of knowledge that many Latter-day Saints feel can influence their lives. Therefore, they study it and are encouraged to pray about it, think about it, and apply it to their lives (Oaks, 1995).

Alex (Methodist) indicated the importance of learning from scripture as a motivation to read. When asked in an interview why he read scripture, Alex said the following:

I would say the main reason I read scripture is to learn. God ha[s] a lot of things to teach us or give us advice on and it seems that the way to learn what he want[s] to teach is to read the Bible. . . . There's just so much knowledge to be gained from it. That's why I read the Bible.

Alex referred to this knowledge acquisition as “the best part” about reading scripture. Alex indicated that God was the source of truth and that God’s truth was manifest in the Bible. The Bible was, in a word, the principal repository of what God wanted the world to know. Moreover, Alex indicated that reading the Bible allowed God to communicate with him. And Alex, Sarah, Jonah and others indicated that God did. By reading scripture and learning what it had to teach, the youth were not only engaging in the historic cultural practice of seeking to know God’s word, but they also may have been seeking knowledge about how to live their lives from core cultural artifacts. Stephen (Latter-day Saint), for example, normally reserved in our interviews, became animated when talking about scripture. He said he read scripture because it helped him “see messages”³⁵ and “really understand . . . important concepts of the Church.” Knowing that he would get messages and learn important concepts appeared to motivate Stephen to read scripture. When Stephen learned these messages or concepts, he said, “You get excited.” A cycle

³⁵ Timothy (Latter-day Saint) referred to messages he got from scripture as “spiritual messages.”

seems to have been created whereby Stephen's positive experiences with learning scripture motivated him to continue reading it. And when he read scripture he continued to have these experiences, which further motivated him to read. This was the same for most of the youth from both denominations: learning from scripture appeared to motivate them to read it. But what exactly did they learn that appeared to be so motivating?

Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth indicated that they were motivated to read scripture because they learned three things. First, they learned more about their religion. Four of the Methodist youth and five of the Latter-day Saint youth reported this. Joshua's (Methodist) words are representative of Methodist and Latter-day Saint responses. Joshua stated that he read scripture to "better understand, you know, what religion is." He elaborated, saying that he read scripture, "trying to get a better background knowledge and understanding about what our religion is based on." Joshua wanted to learn about religion in general – what it is – as well as develop an understanding of what his particular religion (Methodism) was based on. It appeared that Joshua sought answers to important questions, and he believed that the Bible held those answers for him. This appeared to motivate Joshua to read scripture. For him, and other youth, scripture reading was motivated by a desire to learn about religion. Paul (Latter-day Saint) said he was motivated to read scripture to gain "a deeper understanding just of our religion in general, and why we do certain things." As with Joshua, Paul wanted to learn more about his particular religion, but he also wanted to know *why*, as a Christian, he engaged in particular religious practices. Consistent with Paul and Joshua's statements about reading to learn about their religion, Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) stated that she read scripture "to try to understand my religion more." When asked to elaborate, she said that understanding her religion allowed her to "have a solid understanding of what it is that I believe in." And this was important to her, she indicated, because, "[I]t helps me make decisions in my life." Religion was

an important part of these youths' lives and they sought to learn about it. This may have motivated them to read scripture because scripture, they indicated, was a fruitful source for that learning.

Second, Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth also talked about the stories that they learned from scripture as a motivation for reading. Five of the Methodist youth and four of the Latter-day Saint youth reported this. As Alex (Methodist) said in an interview, "there's so much to get out of just a little story." Jennifer (Methodist) agreed, stating that she read the Bible "because of the stories." Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) was more specific about the stories that interested her. She said she read scripture because "there are a lot of stories about, you know, people, actual people." For Kate (Methodist), these peoples' stories, as contained in scripture, were important because they conveyed their "experiences with God and Jesus." She said the Bible was "full of [these] stories." For many of the youth from both denominations, the stories in scripture appeared to be powerful influences in their lives, and they were often present in their conversations. Frequently, during social discussions outside of instructional time the youth talked about scripture stories, peppering their conversations with phrases, characters, and episodes from scripture. During instructional time, these stories were even more prevalent. In many Latter-day Saint and Methodist religious instructional contexts particular scripture stories formed the core text of study, with instruction often moving episodically from one story to another. Clearly, the stories in scripture were more than the sequence of narrative events for these youth. Stories carried messages. Jennifer (Methodist) explained:

[I read the Bible for] the lessons that you're supposed to take from it. . . . Because they had like an important life lesson that people needed to understand. . . . It's more the meanings of the stories that I look for.

For Jennifer, the stories were important, but they led to something more important that lay beyond the events, namely the lessons. Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth referred to these lessons as morals, messages, or principles.

Learning “an important life lesson” contained within the stories was the third and most common element of learning that motivated the youth for literacy. Six of the Latter-day Saint youth and five the Methodist youth reported this. Priscilla (Latter-day Saint), for example, read scripture, searching for principles “because everything in [scripture] is written for a purpose, for us to take something out of it.” Priscilla appeared to take this to heart. She indicated that she believed that as she read, her responsibility was to find those principles that were deliberately included in scripture, and live them. Priscilla appeared to be motivated by this search for principles. Sophia (Latter-day Saint) was too. She elaborated, stating, “I learn lessons from [scripture] all the time. . . . Spiritual types of lessons. I guess spiritual lessons about what I can be doing better.” Sophia articulated the types of lessons she learned from scripture by calling them “spiritual lessons.” She interpreted these lessons as things that she could be doing better in her life, particularly her spiritual life. Daniel (Methodist), in discussing scripture, described his search for messages this way:

You look for what [the] message [is]; what is the moral? What is the truth? Like getting kicked out of the Garden of Eden, you have to say, “I didn’t get kicked out of the Garden of Eden. There is nothing I could have done to get back in there, right now.” So it’s like what’s the lesson here? Why is it relevant? And you say, “Alright, if you lie and disobey God, [then] you’re taking away something good and there are consequences.”

So it’s finding what [the] message is.

In this excerpt, Daniel provided a concrete example of how he found the message in scripture by using the episode of God expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:22-24).

Daniel indicated that he may not have been expelled like Adam and Eve; however, he could still find a lesson in the biblical episode that applied to him, such as, “if you lie and disobey God, [then] . . . there are consequences.” As an indication of the frequency of the lessons that one could find in scripture, Alex (Methodist) said that there was not a lesson in “every single scripture reading.” Then he stated, “Actually, I take that back. I think every scripture reading does have a moral in it.” Samantha (Latter-day Saint) offered an informative take on the lessons that one could find in scripture. Trying to decide what she learned from scripture, Samantha said she learned lessons, and then she said stories, concluding, “It’s both. It’s like a lesson-story.” Samantha’s concept of lesson-story captured the moral and the narrative qualities of scripture her peers identified. She knew that she learned particular stories from scripture, but also bigger ideas than the stories themselves. Samantha brought them together, identifying the substance and motivation of her learning as lesson-stories.

In sum, the cultural importance of scripture as an important source of knowledge and truth motivated these youth to read and study it. The youth were motivated to read scripture specifically by the opportunity to learn more about their own religious beliefs, the stories scripture contained, and the lessons, morals, or principles embedded in the stories. But this was not learning simply to gather information. Youth from both denominations appeared to be motivated to study scripture and learn from it so that they could live what they learned.

“Apply the stories to your life”: Applying Scripture

As mentioned previously, application was closely tied to learning and also a key motivation for literacy. Although Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth did not always use the word *apply*, all of them talked about the concept of application of scripture when they talked about scripture providing “different ways [to] approach your life,” ways to live “the standards, morals, and teachings of my church” or as a “tool to relate to your own experiences.” As with

learning, application appeared to be an important motivation for engaging with scripture for all of the youth. The examples provided in this section are representative of the other youth. If learning from scripture was about learning *how* to live one's life, then applying scripture was about *living* one's life. The motivation to apply scripture was again bound up in the youths' desires to be good members of their faiths, both of which valued living one's religion.

Talking about his scripture reading and what motivated him to do it, Daniel (Methodist) said in an interview, "So, it's like, 'What's the lesson here? Why is it relevant . . . ?' So, it's finding [the] message, like what is the most relevant in the story, and how to apply that?" Daniel appeared to be motivated to read and study scripture to learn things – messages, morals, and lessons – that were most relevant to him and that he could apply directly to his life. He appeared to be trying to be a good Methodist by looking for messages, morals, and lessons and then trying to put them into practice in his life. Daniel did not believe that his religious tradition required enough of him or clearly articulated or focused on important concepts like what it takes to receive salvation, or the place of faith in a Christian's life. He was often saying that he wanted more from his religion. Perhaps some of this call for more direction and focus was related to his social standing among his peers as a thoughtful and intellectually and spiritually eager young man. During one MYF, for example, as Daniel's peers were talking about what they could expect from a "sovereign God," Daniel began talking about how people, as mortals with a desire to create a God they could understand, created God in their own image. When Daniel was done, Melinda turned to me and whispered, "He's so smart." Betsy, the director of Youth Ministries, said, "Very deep" (Methodist, November 9, 2008). After the program, Daniel approached me and said that he made that particular comment to try to deepen the spirituality of his youth group, which he felt was lacking. For Daniel, part of this desire to engage so earnestly with scripture and find lessons to apply to his life may have been related to his interest

in becoming a better Methodist, which may have been related to his social role/responsibility to help others develop their spirituality. In short, living principles he found in scripture was a critical step in becoming the person Daniel wanted to be. It demonstrated his commitment to his faith and his belief that scripture could address some of his own – and perhaps others’ – pressing spiritual issues.

Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) stated that scripture is “the most applicable reading to my life. More so than school reading.” I asked her tell me more about that. She talked about the “principles and teachings” from scripture showing her “how to live and how to have a good life.” Stephen (Latter-day Saint) stated that when he read scripture, “I make sure that I’m able to get a message from it and try and apply that in my life.” Every other Latter-day Saint youth made similar claims about trying to apply scripture. Echoing Priscilla’s claim about the importance of scripture over other texts, Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) stated, “I would say that I think [scriptures] are more important [than other books].” When I asked him why he would say that, Jonathan stated that through scripture, “I can learn how to obey a certain commandment.” For Jonathan, scripture taught him how to live, particularly, how to obey. The stories in scripture showed him how he might live “a certain commandment,” which he stated was important to him. In Chapter Eight I will discuss the place of obedience in Latter-day Saint cultural practice in more detail. Here, Jonathan’s words – and the words of his peers – represent the critical nature of applying scripture to one’s life for Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth.

Alex (Methodist) explained that what he learned from scripture influenced his “own morals and values.” He provided an example from the New Testament:

It is about how Lazareth had a broken leg I believe and everyone was trying to get into see Jesus so that they could be healed. Lazareth was taken to Jesus by his friend on a stretcher but there was no room and too many people for Lazareth's friend to take him

in to be healed. They ended up making a hole in the roof and sending Lazareth down to Jesus. Jesus healed him. This is what true friends would really do for one another. It's the friend that I try to be.

Although the narrative he conveyed may have been factually incorrect,³⁶ Alex's point was clear: This was a story of friendship and he wanted to be the type of friend exemplified in it. This is a very interesting take on this biblical episode because the narrative focus appears to be on Jesus, not necessarily the man seeking help or his friends. By focusing on the man on the stretcher or his friends, one may lose the entire point of the story: Jesus' claim that he could not only heal illnesses, but also forgive sin, which the scribes and Pharisees took umbrage with. In fact, it could be argued that the man's friends were incidental to the entire episode, yet that was Alex's focus. He saw himself as the friend, helping. Alex's reading of this passage was not incorrect; rather, by focusing on the man's friends Alex showed that he brought his own purposes, interests, and cultural values to his interpretation of the passage. Specifically, this episode provided Alex with an example of the lengths true friends would go to help each other. And it had impact on Alex. He thought about it, and concluded that he wanted to be a different person after hearing this story. The details about names and afflictions, it appeared, were not as important as the principle Alex believed he learned, and by extension, wanted to emulate. In short, scripture influenced the type of person Alex wanted to be. The same was true for Sarah.

³⁶ Alex's description is incorrect on a number of counts. First, in the New American Standard Bible that Alex read most often, the man Alex referred to was called Lazarus, not Lazareth. However, Alex could have read other translations that refer to him as Lazareth, but this is unlikely because the most common English translations of the Bible use the name Lazarus (New International Version, New American Standard Bible, The Message, Amplified Bible, New Living Translation, English Standard Version, Contemporary English Version, King James Version, New King James Version, New Century Version, God's Word Translation, American Standard Version, Young's Literal Translation, Darby Translation, Holman Christian Standard Bible, New International Reader's Version, Today's New International Version). Also, Merriam Webster, Dictionary.com, The Compact Oxford English Dictionary, and Google's *define* feature indicated no entry for *Lazareth*. Yet, the possibility still exists that Alex heard someone refer to the man in the story as Lazareth. Second, the sequence of events Alex described does not coincide with Lazarus (who Jesus raised from the dead in John 11); instead, the events coincide with an unnamed man whose friends lowered him through a hole in a roof so that Jesus could heal him. Third, the unnamed man did not have a broken leg. In Matthew 9:2 and Luke 5:18 it states that he was afflicted with some form of paralysis. But Alex was correct on his main point: the man's friends got him access to Jesus.

Sarah (Methodist) indicated that scripture influenced her in very personal ways. She stated that best part of reading scripture was taking “a message [and] incorporating it and taking advantage of it in my own life.” On another occasion, Sarah connected scripture stories and her own personal development when she said, “You kind of always have like tons of stories. Sometimes you don’t even realize it, but I have certain morals or beliefs . . . *because* of those stories. So, I think that’s really been a benefit for me.” Jennifer (Methodist) appeared to agree with the personal influence scripture could have on her when she stated that “scripture . . . kind of helps shape who you are.” Vincent (Latter-day Saint) also indicated how what he learned from scripture influenced him, stating in an interview, “I’ve stuck by the teachings for so long that it’s just kind of shaped who I am.” Vincent, Jennifer, and Sarah indicated how scripture influenced them personally, but Vincent took it a step further stating that the length of time in which he lived the teachings influenced who he was. On another occasion Vincent stated that his religious beliefs and practices, including those from scripture, were “part of my family history.” For Vincent, being a certain type of Latter-day Saint appeared to also be connected to a familial legacy. Being a Latter-day Saint was part of what it meant to be a member of Vincent’s family. That is, Vincent appeared to view his own use of and adherence to scripture in terms of his family’s historical religious roots. “Sometimes you don’t even realize it,” Sarah said, but scripture can influence the way one sees the world, and by extension, who one is or can become. As with Alex, Vincent, and Jennifer, Sarah made links between scripture and her own personal development. For these and other youth, scripture influenced the very people they were and wanted to be. The youth indicated that scripture encouraged them to be, for example, true friends (Alex, Methodist) and faithful Christians (Daniel, Methodist), and provided them with their own sense of morality. Applying scripture in this way, Sarah said, has “really been a benefit for me.”

In terms of motivation for literacy, the goals of learning and applying principles and lessons from scripture appeared to be highly influential for the youth in this study; yet, youth in both denominations were also motivated to read scripture by the strength they believed they received from scripture.

“[Scripture] is my root”: Scripture and Strength in a Troubled World

Many of the youth in both denominations stated that they believed that they lived in a troubled world.³⁷ They often talked about the temptations that enticed them to act in ways contrary to their religious beliefs and practices, but they did not believe that they were on their own in the world. The youth sought help to overcome these temptations and be the kind of people that they wanted to be. Of all their resources, scripture was one of the most powerful because it provided power to act in ways that were beyond one’s limited individual capacities. Five of the Latter-day Saint youth, and one Methodist youth, Sarah, stated that scripture gave them the strength to live their cultural beliefs and practices, or as some of the Latter-day Saint youth referred to it, “live our standards.” As discussed previously, many youth shared experiences that they had with scripture, and Latter-day Saint youth, in particular, indicated that they had read scripture since they were very young children. These youths’ experiences with scripture over the course of their lives may have contributed to the production of these standards, which were often challenged in a world with many choices for how one might believe and live. Trusting, therefore, that scripture gave them individual and social power to act in ways they believed were consistent with their religious beliefs and practices, some of the youth may have been motivated to engage with scripture.

Having the strength to remain faithful amid trials and temptations demonstrated one’s ability to harness divine power to endure in the world, and scripture, for some of the youth, was

³⁷ One Latter-day Saint apostle with which the Latter-day Saint youth may have been familiar talked about living “in a world that is turned upside down” (Packer, 2007).

a critical part of that. *The world* was a common phrase used by both denominations to represent a variety of places and ideas. Sometimes it meant simply the circumstances or place in which one lived. In this sense, there was no judgment. *The world* was simply context or place, as identified in Genesis 1:1 when God created the world. But more often, *the world* was used by both denominations to indicate any insecure place or philosophy outside of the emotionally, socially, and spiritually safe religious contexts and cultures. In this sense *the world* was other and spiritually perilous, as demonstrated by Demas who “hath forsaken [God], having loved this present world” (2 Timothy, 4:10, KJV).³⁸ *The world*, in this sense was “out there,” or “over there,” not “in here.” And it was not safe because “the friendship of the world is enmity to God” (James 4:4, KJV). Therefore, being in the world could lead to terrible things. However, *the world* was not always a place one should avoid. Sometimes one had to venture into *the world* because it was a place of opportunity as with the Latter-day Saint missionary who would go “into the world to share the gospel.” Other times being in the world provided youth with the opportunities to develop talents, testimonies, and faith. In this sense, *the world* represented a testing, or proving, ground where the convictions and practices one had developed could be tried to see how firm they really were or how deep they really went. If one was found wanting, the world could truly be a dangerous place spiritually because being in it could destroy one’s faith, but the youth indicated that scripture, as I will demonstrate in this section, was a vital means of keeping one spiritually strong in a troubling world. Scripture, for some of the youth,

³⁸ My use of scripture here and elsewhere to interpret youths’ words and experiences is meant to support analysis, not take the place of it. In part, my own religious background shaped my use of the Bible as support for the youths’ interpretations of *the world*. Because of my religious commitments I identify with these particular verses and the interpretations they provide of *the world* and one’s relationship with it. These interpretations, I argue, are also consistent with my analyses. Using scripture in this way was also consistent with the place of scripture in many of the youths’ lives. For many of the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth, the Bible was an important, even sacred, text. It is, therefore, appropriate to use verses from the Bible in an attempt to demonstrate the nature of the youths’ conceptions of *the world*, because doing so draws from *their* sacred texts. It would, however, be inappropriate for me to use, say, the Qur’an to interpret these Latter-day Saint and Methodist youths’ words and experiences because from the data I was not able to identify the youths’ conceptions of the Qur’an as an important text in their lives.

appeared to help them “set [their] affections above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3:1, KJV).

The Latter-day Saint youth I studied had an interesting expression about *the world* that demonstrated a particular perspective on their relationship to it. They talked about being “*in* the world, but not *of* it.”³⁹ The first phrase – *in* the world – demonstrated their belief that they lived in a particular environment that may not be accepting of their religious beliefs, values, and practices, much like the representation presented above. For Latter-day Saint youth, “*in* the world” may have represented a contextual reality that they probably could not change. The second phrase – not *of* the world – may have demonstrated their particular response to the temptations that they would face “out there.” This phrase represented their belief that one did not have to participate in “worldly” activities or temptations, especially when they were in conflict with one’s religious convictions and practices. Together, being “*in* the world, but not *of* the world” signaled a view of the relationship between contextual pressures to give into temptation and the belief that one could rise above the temptations (as Demas, apparently, did not). Circumstance, some of the youth may have said, did not always dictate action. One could make choices while living *in* the world that were not *of* the world; that is, one could make choices that were of a higher order. Scripture, the youth indicated, could help them do that. As illustrated in the examples that follow, the youth believed that scripture could give them power.

Every Latter-day Saint youth said that scripture helped them live the standards of the Latter-day Saint Church, but Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) developed this, stating that scripture helped her “remember *why* I live my standards.” Because these youth valued adherence to their religious beliefs, values, and practices the power scripture provided them was essential. In one

³⁹ This is not a uniquely Latter-day Saint phrase. The idea may have come from a number of places in the Bible (Matthew 22:21; John 15:18-19; John 17:13-16; Romans 12:2; 1 John 2:15-17); however, over the course of the study I only heard Latter-day Saint youth and adults use it.

sense, scripture was a tool for increasing their faithfulness. Sophia (Latter-day Saint) alluded to the strength she received from scripture when she said that scripture “is my root. . . . In a lot of ways it keeps me faithful. And it keeps me going.” *Faithful* for Sophia may have represented living by the guidelines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As a high school student, she talked about peers in “the world” that seemed to be guided by principles much different than her own. She appeared to see them as providing one possible future for herself if she did not read and study scripture and embrace her church’s cultural practices. This possible future was more than an idle curiosity for Sophia. She was once like her peers until about three years ago when she and her family renewed their regular church attendance. For Sophia, scripture gave her the power to endure in her faith during difficult times and live the life that she had chosen as a Latter-day Saint. Sophia said simply that scripture had become her root and that it had kept her faithful. Scripture provided some of the youth with the strength they indicated that they needed to be faithful Latter-day Saints, and in the case of Sarah, a faithful Methodist. Jonah (Latter-day Saint), for example, stated that reading scripture “strengthened my testimony [of the Church].” Samantha (Latter-day Saint) said that scripture reading “keeps your faith strong.” In each of these statements, scripture was represented as a means of power to be a certain type of Christian – with a strong testimony or strong faith. Perhaps Timothy summarized best the strength one could receive from scripture when he said scripture helped him “stay spiritually healthy – spiritually active.” For some of these youth, that was power.

Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) reported that he received spiritual help from God in his daily life to be a better person *because* he read his scriptures faithfully. I asked him what he got out of scripture reading. He said the following:

Jonathan: It like helps me in like everyday life because I have those blessings from Heavenly Father for reading . . . my scriptures.

ER: Can you think of an example of . . . how it helps you in your life?

Jonathan: Well, I just tend to have a better day and I'm less grumpy, I guess.

ER: You get grumpy?

Jonathan: Sometimes, like with my siblings I'll kind of be grumpy. Then I'll read the scriptures. And if I'm like really focused on my scriptures, then I can like have a better day.

Scripture could change Jonathan's attitude. He reported that the blessings he received from reading scripture included having a better day and being more patient with his three younger siblings. In fact, Jonathan often read scripture because he wanted to change his attitude. His motivation for reading, therefore, was to rid himself of what he considered inappropriate feelings or actions toward his family members that may have been brought on by experiences at school or the stresses of preparing to move to another state. Notice that casual scripture reading did not provide Jonathan with this strength. In the last sentence Jonathan stated that he received power and blessings "if I'm like really focused on my scriptures." As a religious youth, Jonathan believed he received strength to act in appropriate ways through scripture. Receiving this power may have motivated him to read scripture because being a better person was a powerful social and cultural force in Jonathan's life. He was often trying to do "the right thing," keep the commandments, and be a good brother and son. Through scripture reading, Jonathan stated, he felt that he received the help he needed from God to be the type of person that he wanted to be, even when it was difficult. To use Jennifer's (Methodist) phrase, Jonathan's experience with scripture, "kind of helps shape who you are."

The strength Jonathan received from scripture echoed Sarah's (Methodist) statement about the way scripture can "bring me back to my core [and] center myself." Sarah said, "I love the Bible. It just absolutely fascinates me what you can find it in: Just a simple sentence or verse

that can stick out in your mind.” During an interview I asked her for an example of when that happened. Here is what she said:

I just found one. Let’s see if I can remember it. I want to say it’s Psalm 18:28-32. I think that’s what it is. Because I was getting really frustrated at the end of school, like I was just so tired. The work was getting so hard and just I just found a lot of strength in those verses I was just flipping through, you know, and thinking about you know, asking God like, asking you know, I need something. I want a direction. I need you here. . . . There’s always something to find.

Sarah began to feel overwhelmed by the demands of her course load around the final exams period of her first semester at college, so she stated that she went to the Bible for strength in dealing with the work. This was the first time Sarah had been on her own – out in “the real world” – for an extended period of time, but she had gone to Bible countless times before for strength, and she appeared to believe that it would work because it had worked for her in the past. Sarah’s past experiences with the Bible may have led her to indicate that the Bible grounded her; that is, she found that scripture helped her “center” herself especially during difficult times. And this time at college was no exception. Sarah stated that she just opened the Bible, started flipping through it, and prayed for direction and strength. In answer to her efforts and prayer, she found Psalm 18:28-32. From the New American Standard Bible this passage reads as follows:

For You light my lamp;
The LORD my God illumines my darkness.
For by You I can run upon a troop;
And by my God I can leap over a wall.
As for God, His way is blameless;

The word of the LORD is tried;
He is a shield to all who take refuge in Him.
For who is God, but the LORD?
And who is a rock, except our God,
The God who girds me with strength
And makes my way blameless?

These verses appeared to give Sarah strength to endure the pressures of exams and the other demands of a college student majoring in engineering. Clearly, the strength that she received from the Bible was not an isolated incident. Sarah stated that she grew up listening to her mother read scripture to her and that she had experiences applying scripture to her life. Perhaps as a result of these social and cultural experiences, the Bible became a sacred text, a sort of treasure chest of insight and power for Sarah. She seemed to feel that she could go to it for help. Sarah said on another occasion that she read the Bible “to center myself.” She continued: “There’s always that little passage that has something that I can tie to something in my life.” This appeared to be the case in the above example of finding the verses in Psalm 18 at a difficult time in her life. Knowing that she would find answers and strength may have motivated Sarah to read scripture and seek direction from it. Engaging in scripture this way may have been her way of valuing scripture and demonstrating her devotion to her religious beliefs, values, and practices. In addition to the power some of the youth reported they received from scripture, they also indicated that scripture comforted them. This may have been another motivation to read it.

“Verses that can make you feel good”: Scripture and Feelings of Comfort

As seen in Sarah’s example of final exam pressures, the youth in this study were not immune to the stresses of teenage life. During this study they were troubled by peer and familial

relationships, severe financial crises, crises of faith, angst about their academic standings and college admissions, and a host of other stressors. During these difficult times five of the Latter-day Saint and four of the Methodist youth stated that they engaged with scripture to find peace, rest, or reassurance. Sarah (Methodist), for example, stated she read scripture when she was “really stressed out” to help her calm down. Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) said she read scripture to find comfort “if I’m having problems with something.” Comfort from scripture was a motivational element closely tied, but distinct from strength. Whereas with strength, the youth indicated that they received power from scripture to act in certain ways; with comfort, the youth indicated that scripture (a) calmed them, (b) made them feel better about themselves, and (c) gave them a clearer view of life.

The comfort that these youth received from reading scripture appeared to be a balm during trying times at home, school, or elsewhere. When youth felt comfort, it helped them know that life was okay and that it could get better. Developing peace in one’s life was tacitly consistent with the purpose of much of the work accomplished in religious instruction. On several occasions teachers and adult leaders indicated that they sought to make religious contexts comfortable places for the youth to engage in religious instruction with their peers (Chapter Five). Yet, comfort for some of the youth was fleeting. They searched for it during the week only to find it when they got together as religious peers, in religious contexts. In the following interview excerpt, Melinda (Methodist) articulated the importance of finding comfort in religious settings. Notice how she weaved texts (in this case, talk) with peers, God, and context to represent how interconnected these pieces were in helping youth feel comfortable.

ER: What is the purpose of these discussions [in religious contexts]?

Melinda: The purpose of the discussions is to talk, to communicate, to try and bring you closer to God; to bring you closer to people. A lot of times it is

a haven for teenagers. It is a safe place. If you're having problems at home—you come here. They make you feel comfortable. It is for everything. It is for everything that can make your life easier.

In response to the question Melinda began talking about the purpose of discussions, indicating that they were about talking, communicating, and connecting to God and others. She then made statements that I suspect were about religious contexts, saying that “it is a haven for teenagers,” “a safe place,” and that “you come here” if you are having troubles at home. Then Melinda made another shift when she began talking about what I suspect were the individuals in religious contexts: “They make you feel comfortable.” By the next line – “It is for everything” – the *it* had become ambiguous. The *it* could have referred to religious contexts, or Melinda could have come full circle by referring to discussions again. Even if one were to identify the antecedents of the pronouns in the last two lines, the statements would remain ambiguous: “It is for everything. It is for everything that can make your life easier.”

Although it is at times hard to follow Melinda's use of pronouns, her underlying message is clear: Youth seek comfort and security by engaging with peers through talk about God and religious subjects in religious contexts. Melinda weaved several key elements together in this response to indicate just how vital she believed it was for youth to have a place, an experience, and a friend who could provide comfort and rest from otherwise worrying or hectic events. With this interpretation in mind, Melinda's last two lines appear especially significant. They may be indicating that if youth could find the comfort she referred to, then those places or experiences or people could become “everything that can make your life easier.” Melinda indicated that finding comfort was a critical need for her peers and herself. Religious contexts, religious peers, and religious texts could help meet that need, and in doing so they could become “everything” to some of these youth.

During an interview I asked Daniel (Methodist) about why he read scripture. He talked about reading the Bible before bed, stating, “There’s definitely comforting verses that can make you feel good.” He talked specifically about the story of the Prodigal Son found in Luke 15. It is about a son who takes his inheritance and wastes it in lavish living, only to return to his father to ask for forgiveness. His father forgives him and throws a party to celebrate his return. The Prodigal Son’s older brother, who stayed home serving his father, is upset by his father’s generous reception of his wayward brother. This is the story that Daniel said brought him comfort:

It’s nice. It is sort of comforting to know that no matter how much you mess up, God wants you as soon as you turnaround and sort of start working back towards him. . . .

The lost sheep, the bad brother—the brother that left, I’ll say – they goofed up and yet God found them extremely valuable. And it seems like even if I’ve goofed up, I’m valuable to God—which is a good feeling.

This statement is an excellent example of the importance of comfort and how the youth may have received it through scripture. Daniel understood the story of the Prodigal Son to be about one’s relationship with God. Specifically, he related the Prodigal Son’s mistakes *in the world* with his own, reporting that if he worked through his mistakes and found his way back to God that God would receive him, as the father received the son in the story. This, Daniel reported, comforted him. It helped him realize that he could return to God even though he had made mistakes. Returning to God represented one’s acceptance of God’s word in this life – a turning of one’s heart to God – and ultimately salvation in the life to come, both of which were critically important for Daniel and many of the other youth. Returning to God demonstrated one’s rejection of the things of the world and reception of God’s will. It signaled a deep, personal shift toward divinity that was believed to be observable in one’s daily activities, such as how one

interacted with others, the frequency and fervency of one's prayers and scripture study, and the degree of service one engaged in. Daniel may have found comfort in believing that he could return to God and be valued in God's eyes. This, he said, was "a good feeling"; one that motivated him, and some of his peers, to engage with scripture.

Jonah (Latter-day Saint) expressed similar feelings about his motivation to read scripture. "You kind of feel better after you've read [scripture]" he said. He tried again, "You feel better after you've kind of It's kind of like love . . . kind of that kind of feeling." Finally, Jonah found the right words: "You [read scripture] because it brings you closer to the gospel and you just kind of get this feeling that comes over you when you do, that you're doing something right." Jonah indicated that he was motivated to read scripture because of the way it made him feel. He felt better, loved, closer to God, and that he was doing something right. This notion of doing something "right" was part of a cultural practice that was so ingrained in Jonah that he had internalized the act of reading scripture as a moral imperative, similar perhaps to Timothy's insistence that growing up in the Church explained why scripture was so important to him (Chapter Six). Reading scripture, for Jonah, was simply the right thing to do because it was fundamental to his religious tradition which taught that scripture contained inspired narratives and instruction (Oaks, 1995). Knowing these could bestow status on individuals and mark one as committed to particular cultural beliefs, values, and practices. Moreover, reading scripture, or more specifically, demonstrating one's knowledge of scripture, often signaled to one's peers the strength of one's relationship with God. It appeared to bestow a measure of grace, particularly in social settings when one could recite scriptural accounts or make connections across scripture. Motivated by feelings of comfort, and "rightness," Jonah read scripture. As demonstrated in Chapter Six, reading scripture is what practicing Latter-day Saint youth did. In fact, Jonah was so eager to recapture this feeling of comfort and love that after school he got his

homework done “like, as fast as possible” so that he could read scripture. Sometimes he read scripture first, and then finished his homework later. By the time he began high school, Jonah had read nearly all of the Latter-day Saint standard works, some 2,500 pages of scripture. Yet, he was failing or nearly failing most of his classes in school.

When Jonah talked about school reading, he indicated that he did it because he had to.

Here is an excerpt from one of our interviews:

ER: How often do you read things for school?

Jonah: I have to read every day.

ER: Why do you read things for school?

Jonah: Because we’re told to.

ER: Any other reason?

Jonah: No [laughs].

ER: What’s the best part about these things you read for school?

Jonah: I don’t really like it.

ER: No best part?

Jonah: No best part.

Jonah’s attitudes about school reading contrasted sharply with the words he used to express his motivation for reading scripture as described above. “It’s kind of like love” is worlds apart from “[I read] because we’re told to.” Rushing through homework to read scripture is vastly different from reading for school because “I have to.” These two types of reading, for Jonah, were distinct, and I argue, motivated quite differently. Jonah reported that he was motivated to read scripture because it made him feel good, loved, closer to God, and that he was doing something right. In contrast, he was motivated to read for school out of compulsion. In our interviews, Jonah expressed none of the positive feelings about school reading that he associated with

scripture reading. Scripture, it appeared, may have been a sacred text for Jonah perhaps because of the way it made him feel, in contrast to other types of texts, such as those he read for school. Although the data do not indicate it, Jonah's glum view of school reading and its relationship with his actual literacy practices may have contributed to the academic struggles he experienced during the study.

Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) was motivated to read scripture because it offered him a much clearer perspective on life. He called this clearer perspective an "eternal perspective," stating that this view "makes me feel comforted." I asked Jonathan to say more about scripture giving him an eternal perspective.

Jonathan: Whenever you read the scriptures you remember that this earth is only a short time of your entire eternal life. So, when you're discouraged it's always good to remember that.

ER: Any other ways the scriptures help you keep an eternal perspective?

Jonathan: They just remind me, I guess, whenever they say that. That makes me feel comforted.

ER: To know that this life is just like a short time?

Jonathan: Mhm. So, if I like mess up it's not like the end of the world.

Scripture reminded Jonathan that life on earth was only part of "your entire eternal life." Having an "eternal perspective" meant that one understood the events of this life as they related to pre-mortal and post-mortal existences. This was an important concept for Latter-day Saints. As a Latter-day Saint, Jonathan was taught that he existed as a spirit before he was born on earth. In this pre-mortal life individuals knew each other and learned important lessons they would need on earth (The Pearl of Great Price, 1981). Jonathan was taught that when he died his spirit would continue to live and he would have his memories and everything that he had learned on

earth. Pre-mortal life, according to Latter-day Saints doctrine, is a preparation for mortal life. Mortal life is a preparation for eternity, where one's condition will be influenced by one's thoughts and actions in mortality (Abraham 3:25, Pearl of Great Price, 1981; Mosiah 4:30, Book of Mormon, 1981). By keeping this cultural/spiritual knowledge in mind, Jonathan reported that he could maintain a clearer/eternal perspective on the events of his life. It may have helped him remember that one's decisions in mortality could have consequences into eternity and, therefore, what he did now mattered, a lot. For Jonathan, scripture helped him maintain this eternal perspective, and this comforted him. He said that this perspective was an antidote for discouragement and reminded him that he had time to set things right when he made mistakes. By maintaining an eternal perspective, Jonathan indicated that he had the ability to see experiences more clearly in terms of their long-term importance; to understand, perhaps, that "our everyday problems are not very important in the grand scheme of things" (Stephen). And this, Jonathan indicated, comforted him, and motivated him to read scripture.

In addition to being motivated to engage with scripture because of what they learned, their ability to apply teachings to their lives, the power it gave them to overcome trials, and the comfort it provided during difficult times, some of the youth were also motivated for literacy because it connected them with God. In this final section I explore the social and cultural importance of having a relationship with God and how it manifested itself in some of the youths' motivations for reading scripture.

"Closer to God": Scripture and Connecting with God

Youth from both denominations appeared to seek relationships with God. Most of them appeared to want to know God better than they did and understand God's will in their lives. The Methodist Church teaches that "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both

visible and invisible” (“Articles of Religion,”(n.d.)). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also teaches that God is everlasting, with infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, although, unlike the Methodists, they teach that God has a physical body and is literally the Father of our spirits. Although their conceptions of God were not identical, the important point is that both denominations taught that there was a God and that, in some measure, individuals could connect with God. One way they indicated that they could do this was through scripture study. Four of the Methodist youth and four of the Latter-day Saint youth identified connecting with God as a motivation for reading scripture. I use exemplars from both denominations to represent the perspectives of their peers. Daniel (Methodist) for example, stated in an interview that one of the motivations for reading scripture was to try “to connect with yourself and God.” Jonah (Latter-day Saint) stated that he read scripture to be “attuned . . . to the gospel of Christ.” Both of these statements capture the notion of developing a relationship with divinity, through scripture reading.

Analyses of the data suggest that establishing a relationship with God appeared to be bound up in the importance of God in the lives and religious traditions of these youth. To understand this, it is important to recognize that both denominations taught that God was the source of all life. God was the Creator and *the* Supreme Being without equal. God also had all wisdom and knowledge; that is, God knew things that the youth did not know. Data analyses indicated that the youth reported that God could therefore direct them, which was manifest in the belief that God had a plan for the youth, individually. Moreover, God was also merciful and loving. Often Methodist youth responded to peers’ self-doubts or frustrations with the reassuring phrase, “God loves you.” Latter-day Saints also used the phrase, but less frequently. When they did use it, it was often in response to questions from teachers, a sort of safe response. Yet, for both denominations, the phrase “God loves you” was a representation of a

fundamental tenant of their faiths. In addition to being loving, God also had all power, including the power to answer prayers. And the youth in both denominations stated and demonstrated that they did pray, seeking God's favor in their lives and for those they loved. For both denominations, God was the great divine force for good throughout the world. God was also the ultimate judge. After they died, Latter-day Saints and Methodists taught that God would judge them, and that God's judgment was preeminently fair and final. This is the God Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth sought to connection with through scripture.

I asked Jonah (Latter-day Saint) why he read scripture. He said, "[E]ven though I might have never like met God in person—I still know he's watching over me and stuff. I feel like I should respect Him in that way, and like I should try to get closer to Him." Although veiled in this statement, the phrase, "in that way" referred to reading scripture. Jonah indicated that he could show his respect for God by reading scripture, which could also draw him closer to God. By coming to know God, Jonah and other youth could demonstrate their willingness to respect God and act according to their understanding of God's will for them. Coming to know God in both denominations may have represented the ideal direction and intention of one's life and provided a means with which to measure the quality of one's life. Indeed, connecting with God appeared to be at the center of Latter-day Saint and Methodist youths' religious cultural practices. When they prayed aloud, for example, all of the youth prayed to God, sometimes referring to God more intimately as Father, or Father in Heaven. God was also at the center of instruction in both denominations. Often teachers brought conversations or lessons about such topics as cheating, reciprocity, or sexuality back to one's relationship with God or one's willingness to follow God's commandments (Methodist, January 18, 2009; Methodist, January 25, 2009). For Jonah, one way that he could develop this connection with God was through scripture, and that, I argue, may have motivated Jonah to read scripture.

Alex (Methodist) made a similar statement about feeling like he should read scripture. He said, "I don't want to say *duty*, but I feel like I owe it to God to kind of read His literary work." Although Alex did not explicitly state he read scripture to connect with God, he indicated that he was motivated to read scripture by something akin to doing his duty to God. By viewing his religious literate practice of scripture reading out of a sense of responsibility to God Alex implied a relationship with God that in some way he hoped to strengthen through reading scripture. In support of this interpretation, I turn to other statements that Alex made about his relationship with God. Interestingly, when I asked him how he became religious, Alex talked about God. He said:

I feel like God is always there. You can always go to him for anything. I feel like anywhere else in life we won't always have that. Like, you can go to the church and pray and know that he heard you, you know. He's going to try to help you. And I feel that having that is like a huge constant just always there in life. It's really reassuring.

God was "a huge constant" in Alex's life. Knowing that God was there hearing his prayers was reassuring for Alex. Knowing that he could turn to God, as Alex indicated, should not be taken for granted because elsewhere, "we won't always have that." Although Alex's words were not as clear as Jonah's when he said, "[Scripture] helps me be closer to God," I infer from Alex's statements of devotion to God and his earlier words about feeling that he "owe[d] it to God [out of a sense of duty] to kind of read His literary work" that Alex may have been motivated to read scripture to develop or strengthen his relationship with God. I do not want to characterize the drive to connect with God as an individual motivation. Data presented throughout this dissertation suggest that the youths' motivation was wrapped up in religious, social, and cultural practices. Given the religious and cultural importance of God and scripture in both of the denominations' religious traditions and practices, the four Latter-day Saint and four Methodist

youth who indicated that they were motivated to read scripture to connect with God represented a smaller number than I would suspect.

Within the religious traditions of both denominations, connecting individuals with God was at the center of some of the ordinances they performed. I observed special events such as baptisms and confirmations, and regular sacred events such as the sacrament, or Communion. Although each of these ordinances was intended to fulfill specific purposes, all of them essentially sought to connect individuals with God. During baptism, for example, Latter-day Saints taught that individuals covenanted “to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places . . . and serve [God] and keep his commandments” (Mosiah 18:9-10). When Methodists participated in confirmation they promised “to keep God’s holy will and commandments and walk in the same all the days of [their] life” (Methodist, June 7, 2009). Each Sunday Latter-day Saint youth took the sacrament of bread and water, covenanting to take upon themselves the name of Christ, always remember him, and keep his commandments (Doctrine and Covenants 20:77-79). For both denominations the sacrament, or Communion, was a cultural remembrance of the relationship with God that they had sought to establish through their faith. As analyses of the data suggest, making these connections with God, may have put individuals in a position of favor with God which would allow them to be with God, forever. As it states in the Gospel of John, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (17:3). At least eight of the youth appeared to believe this. They reported that they could know God – connect with God – through various religious and cultural practices, such as reading scripture. This may have motivated the four Methodist and four Latter-day Saint youth to read scripture.

Although I could argue that spoken and written texts were an important part of these ordinances – and they, indeed, were – I use the above examples as evidence to demonstrate

that connecting with God may have held a central place in both denominations' religious, social, and cultural practices. Motivation to read scripture out of a desire to connect with God, then, was a religious practice very familiar to four of the Latter-day Saint and four of the Methodist youth. Specifically, reading scripture to connect with God resonated with a central aspect of other religious and cultural practices such as baptism and Communion. Stephen (Latter-day Saint) was very clear on this point. He stated that scripture "does help to connect me with God." Kate (Methodist) modified this, stating that scripture helped her "understand . . . who Christ was and better understand the nature of God." In each of these statements, the youth articulated the importance of connecting with God through scripture. They appeared to want to develop their relationship with God, which saturated much of their cultural religious experiences. As practiced by some of the youth – and encouraged by their religious traditions – reading scripture could help one connect with God, which was central to some of the youths' motivations for literacy.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I addressed what it was about scripture that motivated youth from both denominations to put forth so much effort to make sense of these texts. The four textual factors the youth associated with motivation for reading scripture were as follows: First, youth were motivated to read scripture because it was an important source of knowing how to live one's life. Second, scripture gave the youth strength to meet life's challenges. Third, it gave them comfort during difficult times. And finally, scripture connected the youth with God. These four motivations were situated within and influenced by the youths' social and cultural beliefs and practices, and occurred as youth interacted with scripture. To more fully understand the youths' motivations for literacy I focus on the youth in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

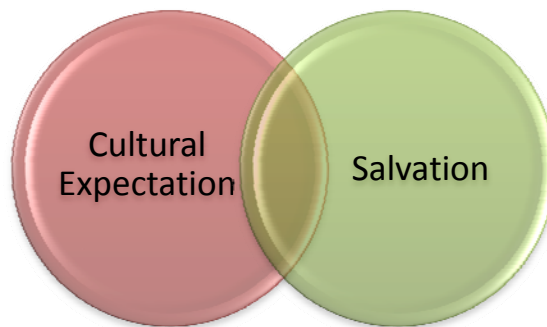
Religious Youths' Motivations for Literacy

In the previous chapter I presented findings that indicated Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth were motivated for literacy by factors associated with their engagement with religious texts. In this chapter I identify youths' motivations for literacy as they relate to their desires to be good members of their religious traditions. Specifically, I identify and discuss two critical motivations for literacy for the youth in this study. First, youth from each denomination expressed clear cultural expectations aligned with their religious traditions that appeared to motivate them for religious literacy. Latter-day Saint youth appeared to be motivated by a cultural expectation of obedience. Methodist youth appeared to be motivated for religious literacy by the influences they identified as belonging to their Christian heritage. Second, the promise of salvation may have motivated some of the youth for religious literacies. Youth from both denominations stated that religious literacy made them better people, which they indicated would help them return to God's presence. Moreover, three Latter-day Saint youth indicated that religious literacies provided them with the knowledge they needed to live with God again. These two motivations for religious literacy – cultural expectations and the promise of salvation – are identified in Figure 8.1. These motivations for religious literacy were associated with youths' social and cultural histories, beliefs, and practices. As with the previous chapter, issues of reader, text, and context intertwine to develop a portrait of religious youth as motivated readers.

Cultural Expectations

There were times that youth in both denominations stated they engaged in religious literate practices simply because it was expected of them. One motivation, then, for engaging in literacy was cultural expectation; that is, reading, writing, or speaking because others wanted or expected them to. For many of the Latter-day Saint youth, the cultural expectations for religious literacy appeared to come from parents, peers, and the Latter-day Saint religious traditions, values, and practices. These expectations were intimately bound up in cultural beliefs and practices about the importance of obedience. For many of the Methodist youth, motivation to engage in religious literacies, particularly scripture reading appeared to be mediated by their perceived influence from the larger Christian culture. These cultural expectations for Latter-day Saints and Methodists provided a source of encouragement for many of the youth to engage in religious literacy, and also represented what believing Latter-day Saints and Methodists did.

Figure 8.1 Youths' Motivations for Literacy



“It’s a commandment”: Latter-day Saints and Obedience

As suggested earlier in this dissertation, obedience appeared to be an important cultural characteristic for some of the Latter-day Saint youth. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that God speaks to prophets and that prophets speak God’s word to people, often through scripture (*True to the Faith*, 2004). Stephen (Latter-day Saint) expressed his notion of this clearly, stating, “[S]criptures are from the prophets and the prophets get their

words – what they say – from Heavenly Father.” Stephen and his peers in this study appeared to feel obligated to follow the counsel of the men they sustained as prophets. If prophets, therefore, encourage scripture study, the youth may have felt bound to study scripture. Vincent (Latter-day Saint) represented the sentiment of many of his peers when he said that he read scripture because “it is encouraged to read your scriptures every night and say a prayer every night and in the morning. I think that a big reason why I do them is because it’s been encouraged to.” For Vincent, the encouragement from Church leaders to read scriptures appeared to be enough for him to do it. He was not alone. Six of the Latter-day Saint youth made similar statements about engaging in religious literate practices out of a sense of obedience to authority. Although six of these youth indicated that they engaged in religious literate practices because it was expected of them, they did not look at this as a cause for cynicism. By engaging with, or as they would argue, exercising faith by reading scripture, some of these Latter-day Saint youth indicated that they eventually discovered the importance of the counsel to study scripture daily. For example, at the conclusion of the thought Vincent began above, he said that reading scripture and praying initially because “it’s been encouraged,” led him to realize for himself “that it does help.”

Timothy (Latter-day Saint) said that sometimes he read scripture so that people would “get off your back.” On occasion, he appeared to feel compelled to read scripture just to stop people, such as his parents, from bothering him about it; however, Timothy stated that this was not an ideal motivation for him. In the following excerpt Timothy contrasted reading scripture “because it’s expected” with “reading it seriously.”

Sometimes I read my scriptures because it’s expected, but other times I read it because like—I’m going to say the *right* reasons. When I’m bored and I’m reading it because it’s expected and stuff and it’s a lazy scripture reading section, I just ignore it and don’t try

to understand it. But if I'm actually reading it seriously, then I'll think about it until I eventually get it.

Timothy indicated that reading out of expectation, or to get people "off your back" was not a proper reason to read scripture; nevertheless, sometimes that was his primary motivation. Reading out of expectation carried a number of consequences, namely that Timothy would "ignore" what he was reading and not put forth effort to make sense of it. In contrast, reading seriously – not because it was expected of him – was one element that constituted "the *right* reasons." The right reasons appeared to motivate Timothy to think more deeply about his reading which he said helped him understand it.

Stephen (Latter-day Saint) began reading religious periodicals published by the Church because his mother told him to. Unlike Timothy, Stephen did not appear to resist his mother's expectation to read religious material. I asked him why he read a particular Latter-day Saint periodical. He said:

Well, my Mom kind of encouraged me to read it because I wasn't reading it before.

When I was younger I'd read *The Friend* magazine.⁴⁰ And then that got too young and I was kind of in the middle, so my Mom told me to read *The New Era*. . . .⁴¹ And so that's why I read it.

Stephen's matter-of-fact tone carried none of the critique Timothy offered about reading religious material because of others' expectations. For Stephen, it appeared perfectly acceptable to engage in religious literacy because his mother expected him to do it. In fact, for many Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth in this study religious literacy began as a social expectation of family, friends, and religious traditions. It was simply what they did. This appeared to be the case for Jonathan (Latter-day Saint). During the study, I was struck by Jonathan's repeated

⁴⁰ A Latter-day Saint periodical for children.

⁴¹ A Latter-day Saint periodical for youth (teenagers).

references to obedience as a driving force in his religious and personal life. For Jonathan, keeping the commandments appeared to represent an important cultural and religious benchmark for him.⁴² I asked him what motivated him to read scripture and he said simply, “It’s a commandment.” Jonathan’s parents encouraged him to learn and obey commandments. Obedience was important, and, for Jonathan, it appeared to be sufficient; so much so that “It’s a commandment” was an entirely legitimate motivation for reading scripture, praying, and writing each night in his journal. For Jonathan, engaging in religious literacy out of an expectation of obedience was enough.

Although Paul (Latter-day Saint) used different language than many of his Latter-day Saint peers, he expressed the same sentiments about the relationship between obedience and religious literate practice. During one of our conversations Paul talked about being a Latter-day Saint. I asked him what that meant to him. Paul said: “You know, just to follow the commandments that we’ve been given through prophets and stuff like that. Just like following the word of wisdom and, you know, following the commandments and learning more about the scriptures and the gospel.” Paul used the word *follow/following* three times in two sentences, stating that for him being a Latter-day Saint meant following the commandments – which were given by prophets – following the Word of Wisdom, and learning about scripture. Paul’s use of the word *follow/following* may have indicated his sense of responsibility to the commandments, prophets, and other tenets of Mormonism. His words suggest the importance of obedience in his religious life, and when taken together with his peers’ suggest a larger cultural pattern which may have motivated him and other Latter-day Saint youth for religious literacy.

On another occasion after Paul stated that he read scripture, I asked him what he got out of his reading. He stated that scripture “helps you to understand why our religion has

⁴² I asked Jonathan what it meant to be a Mormon. He stated, “You obey the commandments of that church.” He also said that “obeying the commandments” was what it meant to practice his religion.

certain values and why we should really follow them.” In the first statement, Paul indicated his notion of obedience to Mormonism when he stated that he followed the commandments by reading scripture; thus suggesting that obedience may have been a motivational force in his religious literate practice. In the next statement Paul indicated that reading scripture helped him know why he “should really follow [the standards of the Church].” These two statements appeared to reinforce each other and the important relationship between obedience and religious literate practice. For Paul, obedience appeared to drive his scripture reading, and when he read scripture, his reading appeared to reinforce his conception of the importance of following the tenets of Mormonism, such as scripture reading.

As Paul’s and his like-minded peers’ responses indicated, obedience in Latter-day Saint culture may have played an important role in influencing such things as literate practice. Because The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that God inspires prophets and that their Church is led by a prophet, the prophet’s words (in ancient and modern scripture) and those of other general authorities carry tremendous weight in the Church. Many Latter-day Saints are morally bound to follow the prophet; as such, faithful Latter-day Saints, young and old, obey. An early Latter-day Saint prophet stated, “Obedience is the first law of heaven” (Smith, 1873, p. 248). With regard to literacy, Latter-day Saint youth are regularly encouraged by local and the general Church leadership to read scripture, pray often, and keep journals (Bednar, 2009; *Ensign*, 2005; Nelson, 1999; Oaks, 1995; Perry, 1994; *True to the Faith*, 2004). A passage in the Doctrine and Covenants that many Latter-day Saints know by heart states, “I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise” (82:10). Even though they may not understand all of the reasons that they should do something, like study scripture daily, Mormonism teaches that individuals will be blessed simply *because* they are obedient to God’s commandments. These Latter-day Saint youths’ hope appears to be that

acting in faith, in such things as literate practice, will put one in a position to know, at some future time, why a certain practice was so important. Over the course of this study, a number of congregants shared personal experiences during Latter-day Saint worship services of acting faithfully by reading scripture and praying during trials, expressing their faith that obedience gave them the strength to endure difficult times. Youth also received messages about the importance of obedience through lessons in Sunday school, Young Men and Young Women classes, and seminary. It is, therefore, understandable that some of the Latter-day Saint youth would engage in religious literacies, at least initially, out of a cultural expectation of obedience.

“My Christian base”: Methodists’ Christian Influence

Methodists were also influenced in their motivations for religious literacy by cultural forces. As the analyses of data will demonstrate, the Methodist youth in this study understood Methodism as part of a larger Christian religious culture, which is consistent with the origins of Methodism (Burton, 2008; “Our distinctive heritage,” 2010; Tomkins, 2005). Every Methodist youth talked about what it meant to be a Methodist in terms of being a Christian, or learning and following Jesus’ teachings. This is not particularly surprising because of Methodism’s ostensible focus on Jesus’ life and teachings; however, some of the youth also identified some of the cultural forces of Christianity that influenced their decisions and behaviors. For example, four of the Methodist youth indicated that at least part of their motivation to read scripture came from the pressure that they felt as Christians to know the central Christian text, the Bible. Clearly, reading scripture has a long and influential history in Christianity (Strong, 1974) and American religious history (Prothero, 2007). This is not to suggest that Methodism does not have a rich legacy of scripture reading. It indeed does (Burton, 2008; Tomkins, 2005), yet, four of the Methodist youth in this study indicated a stronger connection to the larger Christian culture as a motivation for reading scripture than their own denominational scripture reading culture

and practices. One reason for this may have been that the actual practice of reading scripture was not a dominant literate practice in this particular Methodist congregation (Chapters Six and Seven).

For Daniel (Methodist), the Bible was an important text. In the following excerpts Daniel expressed his motivation to read scripture in terms of his *Christian* cultural values; specifically, he connected his reading of the Bible with his sense of responsibility to know it, as a Christian. Clearly, the Bible was important to Daniel. He stated that the Bible “is basically like *the* text on Christianity. It is your life.” Daniel expressed in this statement the importance of the Bible in Christian culture, at large, calling it “*the* text on Christianity.” He then appeared to indicate how important he believed it should be to individuals, stating, “It is your life.” Drawing upon these two conceptions of the importance of the Bible to Christianity and to individuals, the phrase “It is your life” may be properly amended to read, “It is your life, *if you’re a Christian*,” which Daniel was. Elsewhere, Daniel also stated that his Christianity motivated him to read the Bible. “[I was] inspired . . . to read the Bible [because] I felt that as a Christian I should know the Bible very well as a cornerstone of my religion.” Here, Daniel identified his motivation, as a Christian, to read the Bible. He indicated that he felt that he had a responsibility to know the Bible because of what he professed to believe and practice as a Christian and because of the Bible’s place in his Christian tradition. Simply put, it appeared that being a Christian, for Daniel, motivated him to read the Bible. On another occasion Daniel explained, “You read about stuff that’s important to you and so that would be your lifestyle. As a Christian, I read about Christian stuff.” For Daniel, important “Christian stuff” included the Bible. Being a Christian may have demanded a number of commitments and practices from these youth, but for Daniel and a number of his Methodist peers, engaging with the Bible may have been one of the most important demands of Christianity.

During an interview Joshua (Methodist) and I were talking about why he read the Bible. As with Daniel, Joshua connected his motivation for reading scripture with his professed Christianity:

And so it's important to know what your religion is based off of. You can't go around proclaiming you believe in Jesus and all the good things and celebrate Christmas and stuff, but you don't really—you haven't actually read the Bible. [If you haven't read the Bible] then maybe you're not quite sure what you're representing.

Joshua appeared to be cognizant of his identity as a Christian, and as a member of the Christian tradition, Joshua appeared to feel motivated to know what he claimed to practice and believe, or “know what your religion is based off of.” For him, one way to do this was to read the Bible. In this response, Joshua connected his Christian identity, and many of the elements that related to it, with the Bible. “You can't go around proclaiming you believe in Jesus” he said, “[if] you haven't actually read the Bible.” That is, Joshua indicated that he may not have felt comfortable claiming to believe in Jesus and live as a Christian without knowing the Bible. Furthermore, he stated that without having read the Bible he may not be “quite sure what [he's] representing [as a Christian].” This larger cultural pressure, as a Christian, to know what he professed to believe may have motivated Joshua to engage more readily in scripture reading and learning about his religious tradition so that, perhaps, he could be the kind of Christian he felt that he should/could be – one that knew exactly what he was representing.

When I asked Kate (Methodist) what religion she was, she stated, “My religion is Christian. I don't really know how Methodists, or whatever. I believe Jesus. I believe in Jesus.” Kate was very clear about identifying herself as a Christian first. She even explicitly distanced herself from Methodism and returned to the larger Christian focus – Jesus – stating twice, “I believe (in) Jesus.” Part of Kate's distancing from Methodism may have had to do with her

critique that she did not learn as much as she wanted to learn as a Methodist, perhaps about Jesus. As a Methodist, Kate said “we don’t incorporate [Bible study] enough. . . . I definitely would have liked to have, you know, maybe when I was little, just more of the stories and stuff like that.” Kate’s words suggest a degree of frustration for not being taught what she felt were important elements of her faith, such as knowing the Bible. She placed this responsibility upon her church, indicating that the Church – over the several years that she attended – should have provided her with the knowledge that she now lacked, and desperately wanted. Perhaps Kate’s frustration with the Church’s lack of attention to the Bible rested in her identification as a Christian. In other words, since Kate did not learn enough about God and Jesus from her religious denomination she may have been frustrated in the development of her Christian identity. On another occasion, Kate was clear about the place of Jesus in her life and motivation for reading scripture. When I asked her why she read the Bible, Kate said that the Bible “can help you understand . . . who Christ was and better understand the nature of God.” Taken together, Kate’s comments about the centrality of God and Jesus in her life and the place of the Bible in helping her know them better, suggest that Kate may have been motivated to read scripture as a result of the values and practices attached to a larger Christian culture; values and practices that she felt she was not getting enough of in her church.

In a conversation about what motivated Sarah (Methodist) to engage in discussions during religious services, she indicated her connection to Christianity, not necessary Methodism, as a driving force. She stated:

Obviously I haven’t discussed everything that there is to discuss in Christianity by any means. But I’ve obviously covered . . . you know, there’re only so many topics. . . . I couldn’t just name them off, but there are big chunks of concepts that you go through—kind of over and over and you build upon throughout your time in the church. . . .These

discussions are just another input into that—into my knowledge—into my Christian base that I have.

Sarah indicated on several occasions that she wanted to be a strong Christian, and discussions in religious contexts helped her do that. Over time, as she attended religious services, read the Bible, and participated in religious discussions, Sarah stated her belief that she would become a more knowledgeable and believing Christian. The discussions, in particular, she stated, were “another input” into the “Christian base” that she had deliberately developed throughout her life. The phrase “Christian base” may have reference to Sarah’s lifestyle. She stated that she aimed to conduct her life according to standards that she believed were in the Bible – Christian standards. This is supported by Sarah’s statement: “I try to carry myself as a Christian. And just try to live a Christian lifestyle.” On another occasion she talked about “just living [in] a way that represents yourself as a Christian.” For Sarah, the Bible appeared to be a very important part of helping her live a Christian lifestyle. As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, Sarah treasured the Bible and her experiences going to it for answers and strength. Her religious literate practices, she indicated, may have been motivated in part by her belief that they would help make her a better, stronger Christian.

In summary, cultural forces may have influenced the motivations of some of the Methodist and Latter-day Saint youth for religious literacy. For example, all of the Methodist youth stated that they saw themselves as Christians. And being a Christian demanded certain things of them, such as scripture reading. Four of the Methodist youth indicated that they were motivated for religious literacy because of their understanding of the demands of Christianity to read the Bible. For the Latter-day Saint youth, obedience was a powerful cultural force. Six of the Latter-day Saint youth indicated that their desire to obey the teachings of the Church (which included regular scripture study) motivated them to engage in religious literate practices.

Salvation: “The ultimate goal”

Mortality was important, but it was only *part* of the “big picture” (Kate, Methodist).

Both denominations taught that there was an existence after mortality and that one’s actions in mortality would influence one’s condition in the life to come. It was, therefore, important that youth did “the right thing” now (which included religious literate practices), so that they could receive the Lord’s blessings here *and* in the hereafter.⁴³ In this section, I demonstrate how youth from both denominations were motivated for religious literacy because it helped them achieve salvation, and how this was influenced by the denominations’ social and cultural beliefs, practices, and histories. Specifically, some of the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth indicated that religious literacy practices helped them (a) become better people, and (b) develop religious knowledge, both of which, they stated, aided in their goal to live again with God after this life. Four of the Methodist youth and five of the Latter-day Saint youth indicated that they were motivated for religious literate practices because they provided them a path to salvation.

“Faith,” Tillich (1957) stated, “is the state of being ultimately concerned” (p.1). The ultimate blessing of faithful religious literate practice appeared to be salvation, eternal life, or living with God in what the Christian tradition calls heaven. Heaven is the ultimate goal for Christians. They believe that it is a place of eternal rest and peace. Latter-day Saint youth referred to this as living in the celestial kingdom.⁴⁴ The possibility of being with God at some future time after mortality is a familiar theme in the Bible (John 3:15-16; 6:40; 1 John 2:25) and

⁴³ From a self-determination theory perspective, Dowson (2005) articulated the two sets of valued outcomes for religious motivation as those that occur before death and those that occur after death. Valued outcomes before death included understanding the purpose of life. The valued outcome after death, for Christians, was heaven, salvation, or eternal life.

⁴⁴ As with most of the Christian world, Latter-day Saints believe that individual souls continue to live after the body dies. Latter-day Saints, however, do not believe in a heaven or hell, per se. It is a little more complex. It might be said that Mormons believe in three heavens – or kingdoms – awaiting post-mortal souls (Doctrine and Covenants, 76). Of the three, the celestial is the highest. It is compared to the glory of the sun, the next kingdom is compared to the glory of the moon, and the lowest kingdom is compared to the glory of the stars. Those who go to the celestial kingdom “shall dwell in the presence of God . . . forever and ever” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:62). Latter-day Saint scripture states that living in the celestial kingdom after mortality is the highest reward God can offer (Doctrine and Covenants 14:7).

the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 31:20; Enos 1:27; Ether 15:34). Scripture promises eternal life to those who are faithful, which may be “one of the most powerful stimulants . . . in this life” (Halley, 1965, p.515). The promise of eternal life was also present in ordinances such as confirmation. The Methodists’ confirmation was an antiphonal ordinance through which youth confirmed their faith in the Church and their willingness to serve in it. The pastor, confirmands, parents, and congregation each had speaking parts. The final exchange in the ordinance occurred between the pastor and the congregation. The pastor addressed the congregation, asking them if they would “do all in your power to increase [the confirmands’] faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them in love.” In response, the congregation addressed the confirmands, stating, in part, that they would help lead them to salvation. The congregation said: “With God’s help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ that, surrounded by steadfast love, you may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal” (Methodist, June 7, 2009). In ordinances and scripture, the promise of eternal life appeared to be prevalent. However, analyses of the data do not support that Latter-day Saint or Methodist youth reported that one would go to heaven simply because he read scripture. Rather, some of the youth (four Methodist and five Latter-day Saint) indicated that religious literacies were a means through which they could develop religious knowledge over time and become better people with a greater capacity to love and serve God. In this way, some of the youth indicated that literacy endowed them with grace which would literally put them in touch with the divine.

Becoming Better People

As demonstrated in previous chapters (Six and Seven), many of the youth in this study indicated that their religious traditions and religious literate practices could help them become better people. In this section, I return to this motivation for religious literacy and demonstrate

how becoming a better person motivated some of the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth for religious literacy because it could help them gain salvation. Daniel (Methodist) reported, for example, that living with God was important to him. It bothered him that his religious denomination did not talk more about getting to heaven, given its importance in his faith and Christianity in general. He admired Baptists, whose services he had attended, for focusing more on what it took to be “saved. “He said this focus was “one thing I think our church lacks in teaching.” I asked him more about that. This is what he said:

This whole idea about heaven and hell, it scares me. I mean how scary. The thought of it. And eternity. . . . Anyway, it’s just mind boggling. But eternity away from God . . . that’s what hell is.

Daniel stated that he believed that he could be with God after mortality, but that his religious tradition was not adequately preparing him for it. He found notions of the permanency of the afterlife troubling, calling them “scary” and “mind boggling.” The nature of eternity, however, may have helped him understand what was at stake: the eternal condition of his soul. For Daniel, and other Christians, heaven appeared to be the objective. As Alex (Methodist) and Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) said, their goal was to “actually get to heaven” and be with God. Hell was heaven’s antithesis, essentially “heaven lost” (Saward, 2005, p.94); or, as Daniel put it, hell was “eternity away from God.” Literacy, however, could facilitate Daniel, and some of his peers’ aspirations to get to heaven by helping them become better people, more capable of understanding and living according to God’s will. By becoming better, more faithful individuals (through literate practices), some of the youth indicated that they believed that they could return to God’s presence. Here is what Daniel (Methodist) said when I asked him what it meant to be religious:

As a Christian, we have Jesus—that’s like the goal. . . . [T]hrough the Bible and throughout personal experiences and scripture you’re able to find what you think Jesus would do. So yeah, I try to model my life after Jesus. I’m a Christian.

Here, Daniel connected reading scripture and trying to be like Jesus. He said that Jesus was the goal, and that he could model his life on Jesus’ life, at least partially, through familiarizing himself with scripture. In a word, understanding scripture could help Daniel understand what Jesus would do, so that he could do it too. Other youth were equally clear about religious literacies helping them live better, more faithful lives. Stephen (Latter-day Saint), for example, claimed that reading religious materials “can help your life by being kinder and following the commandments.” Daniel (Methodist) said, “The Bible helps me grow spiritually. . . . It stretches thoughts, minds, and ideas.” Jonathan (Latter-day Saint) also claimed that reading scripture made him less “grumpy” and a better brother to his siblings. Also, Alex (Methodist) claimed that he wanted to be the type of friend exemplified in a particular biblical episode (Chapter Seven). By helping some of the youth from both denominations be better people, these youth suggested that scripture could help them obtain the ultimate reward in Christianity – eternity with God, in heaven.

Sarah (Methodist) and Samantha (Latter-day Saint) provided an interesting take on religious literate practices helping them become better people. Both young women indicated that scripture helped them measure their personal development. Sarah (Methodist) stated that scripture reading helped her to think more deeply about her life and provided a benchmark for her personal growth. She said when she read scripture she would “reflect on what was going on [in my life] at the time or like how I’ve grown from that [experience] and seeing what changes I’ve made.” For Sarah, scripture reading appeared to be a personally reflective practice. She indicated that as she read scripture she reflected on the experiences she was going through and

considered how those experiences facilitated her personal growth. It is interesting that she used the word *changes* to evaluate “how I’ve grown.” This suggests that Sarah felt that scripture reading altered her in some way. Given Sarah’s expressed feelings for the Bible – “I love those stories. I love reading out of that book” – the data suggest that she may have felt that the Bible changed her for the better.

Samantha (Latter-day Saint) made a similar claim about religious writing as a method of monitoring her personal growth. As we talked about the writing that she did for religious purposes, Samantha said that “it kind of shows me how far I’ve come.” Samantha indicated that she wrote for religious purposes as often as a few times each week, but that she also reread much of her writing, particularly her journal writing. Doing so may have provided her with a view of her past self as expressed in her journal entries that she compared to her present self reading the entries. As with Sarah, Samantha suggested that she could see a degree of growth or personal development through her reflective religious literate practices. Through reading religious texts or writing texts for religious purposes these young women appeared to be able to see how their lives were shaping up spiritually, which may have allowed them to determine how well they were living in accordance with their religious beliefs and practices, and perhaps how close they were to the promised rewards.

Developing Knowledge

As demonstrated in the previous chapters (Six and Seven), gaining religious knowledge motivated youth to engage in literate practices such as reading religious texts. In this section, I return to the development of knowledge as a motivation for religious literacy, but focus on another aspect of its relationship with religious literacy, namely its place in gaining salvation. Although all of the youth in this study indicated that developing and applying religious knowledge motivated them for religious literacy (Chapter Seven), only three Latter-day Saint

youth (Stephen, Samantha, and Timothy) connected developing knowledge through religious literate practices with going to heaven. Given the supreme reward represented by heaven and the centrality of scripture and the practices designed to develop knowledge of its content and principles, it is curious that more youth from both denominations did not express sentiments similar to these three Latter-day Saint youth.

For Stephen (Latter-day Saint), religious literacy appeared to help him learn important religious principles, which he indicated would help him return to God. During an interview in which Stephen and I were talking about reading religious texts he said that the best part was gaining a better understanding of religious concepts. He then explained why learning about these concepts was important. He said, “[B]ecause you want to be able to return to the celestial kingdom and be with Heavenly Father.” Religious literacies, it appeared, provided Stephen with important knowledge that could help him accomplish his goal of being with God again after this life. This connection between studying and understanding scripture and returning to God represented a strong motivation for engaging in religious literacies. In a word, literacy may have put Stephen on the path to salvation because it helped him understand important concepts about God and his religion.

For Samantha (Latter-day Saint), developing greater knowledge of her religion may have helped her develop a relationship with God. She said that reading scripture helped us “know what we’re talking about . . . when we talk to Heavenly Father with questions with what we have read.” In this short excerpt, Samantha indicated that she talked with God about what she read in scripture. Samantha did not explicitly state that developing knowledge through scripture helped her gain salvation; however, she indicated that the knowledge she could gain from her scripture study could aid her in developing a relationship with God; specifically, that she would know what she was talking about when she approached God with questions. On another

occasion, Samantha talked about what she learned when she “asked [God] questions.” She said that when she did this she was able to “gain insights and learn more about Heavenly Father and the Church.” The right bits of knowledge, it seemed, could make a difference in Samantha’s life and perhaps even her relationship with God, which she seemed to try to do through prayer and scripture study. Samantha’s statements indicated great effort on her part to develop a relationship with God, which I interpret to suggest an interest, on Samantha’s part, in returning to God, which was consistent with their Latter-day Saint religious tradition.

In one of our conversations, Timothy (Latter-day Saint) rehearsed what Latter-day Saints call “the Plan of Salvation.” An official Latter-day Saint publication (*True to the faith*, 2004) stated that it was “a plan [prepared by Heavenly Father] to enable us to become like Him and receive a fullness of joy” (p.115). Timothy’s explanation attended to a few of the big ideas in the Plan: pre-mortal life, earth life, agency, work, and returning to God. Timothy explained it this way:

We, all of us, used to live in heaven, then we were born. And [when we were in heaven] we didn’t have any physical bodies, then we were born in this earth with physical bodies. And as we passed through the veil, we forgot all about heaven. And *now* our concept is [that] God has given us all our agency and we can choose whatever we want. And our concept is that the point of life on earth is to work your way back toward being like God: living in heaven.

The most relevant part of Timothy’s explanation – for this discussion – is his last line about “the point of life on earth.” Timothy stated that this life was about trying to return to God. One important way that Timothy tried to do that was by reading scripture. During the same conversation Timothy talked about the religious practices that he engaged in at home. He named two of the most important to him, prayer and scripture study. I asked him why prayer

was so important. He said that prayer was about “just keeping you in-tact with [Heavenly Father].” I asked him why scripture study was important. He said, “And scriptures is [sic] the same thing; it’s keeping your spiritual knowledge up.” Although Timothy did not explicitly state that scripture helped him return to the presence of God, his responses to the importance of prayer and scripture study suggested that maintaining a relationship with God was an important motivation for both of these practices. Specifically, Timothy stated that reading scripture was important for the same reason that prayer was important; namely, that it kept him “in-tact with [Heavenly Father].” Then, he added that scripture also helped him maintain his “spiritual knowledge.” I interpret Timothy’s motivations for reading scripture – to stay close to God and gain spiritual knowledge – and his conception of the purpose of this life – to get back to God – to suggest that Timothy may have felt that his efforts to learn from scripture could contribute to his reunion with God in heaven.

Priscilla (Latter-day Saint) stated that “the ultimate goal is to have eternal life.” In the Christian tradition this meant living with God in a state of eternal bliss. Five of the Latter-day Saint youth and four of the Methodist youth indicated that engaging in literate practice could help them along the path to salvation. Specifically, some of these youth indicated that reading scripture could make them better people, which could help them return to God. Moreover, three of the Latter-day Saint youth indicated that through scripture they could develop important knowledge which would also put them on the road back to God. Tillich (1957) called the hope of salvation the “ultimate promise” of faith (p.2). This promise appeared to have motivated some of the youth in this study for religious literate practices.

Summary and Conclusion

Literacy, for the youth in this study, was an important way for them to develop and demonstrate their faithfulness. The youth appear to be motivated for religious literacies by

cultural expectations of literate practice and the promise of salvation. These motivations were associated with the youths' religious cultures, values, and histories. Taken together, this chapter demonstrates that some of the youth were motivated for literacy by a number of factors, including textual and contextual factors. In the final chapter I draw conclusions from the study, including a set of motivation for literacy superordinate themes that cut across text, reader, and context domains. I also identify implications of the dissertation and briefly outline recommendations for further study.

Chapter 9

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Before moving into this study's conclusions, implications, and recommendations, I would like to briefly return to my impetus for conducting the study. As a high school English teacher I saw how important religion was to many students. Students brought religion into schools and classrooms through their speech, self-selected reading material, clothing, and writing. In the lives of these youth, religion and literacy, it seemed to me, were very important and closely connected. The importance of religion in the lives of so many youth forced me to think seriously about these students' literate practices and the motivations that drove them. Religion is often a complex and potentially volatile subject, particularly as it relates to education (Nash and Bishop, 2010), and research has provided precious little knowledge about religion in relationship to literacy and motivation. I undertook this study to better understand the relationship among religion, literacy, and motivation, hoping that the results would inform educators and scholars alike.

This dissertation was a study of religion as cultural practice. Its purpose was to explore what motivated religious youth to develop and use religious literate practices as part of their cultures and identities. To do this, this study investigated the relationships among Latter-day Saint and Methodist youths' literate practices and their religiously situated beliefs, values and purposes and how they related to motivation. The following questions guided this study:

1. What are these youths' religious literate practices?
2. How do contexts influence motivation for religious literacy?

3. What motivations can be drawn from texts?
4. What motivations for religious literacy does the learner bring to texts and contexts?

As this dissertation has shown, these questions are not easily addressed in isolation.

Literate practices occur in specific contexts as youth interact with texts. Similarly, youths' motivations for religious literacy are influenced by interactions with texts, in specific contexts.

This chapter begins with general conclusions drawn from the study, followed by implications for research and practice. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further study.

Conclusions

Scholars have argued that in the United States, well before the American Revolution, the three *Rs* of education – reading, writing, and arithmetic – were superseded by the first *R* – religion – because being “right with God” was the issue that drove literacy and learning (Prothero, 2007). Prothero argued that in early American history, “religion permeated the classroom” (p.92) and students learned from “scripture-saturated schoolbooks” (p.87). Religion, at one point in the history of the United States, saturated a great deal of youths' literate learning and literate practice (Banton-Smith, 1934/2002). Today, times may have changed, yet, religion still plays a vital role in the lives of the vast majority of American youth (Lerman, 1998; Smith and Denton, 2005; Wallace and Williams, 1997). Moreover, many youth in the United States may still learn their first, and often most powerful, literacy lessons at home and church using religious texts, narratives, symbols, and metaphors (Farr, 2000; Guerra and Farr, 2002; Zinsser, 1986). In a word, religion remains a profound influence in the development of literacy across the United States.

Yet, literacy scholars have paid little attention to the literate practices of religious youth. Nor have scholars attended to the motivations that drive these literate practices. This is a

serious oversight, given the large number of religious youth for whom religion and religious literacies are important, and the powerful and complex role that religion, religious texts, and religious contexts can play in motivating youth for literacy. This study develops knowledge about religious youths' literate practices and the motivations behind them.

Literate Practice

This study demonstrated that Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth viewed scripture as a central part of their religious literacy experiences and were motivated to read scripture, despite its linguistic complexity and the inclusion of concepts and behaviors that were removed from the youths' everyday experiences. With regard to their literacies, youth from both denominations engaged in a number of discourses that were highly valued in their religious cultures, and contexts. These Discourses were one way that the cultural forces that influenced the youths' engagement with their valued literate practices were manifest; moreover, these Discourses provided youth with the opportunities to take social positions consistent with their deeply held religious beliefs, values, and practices. The instruction in both religious contexts was dominated by the general models of religious instruction. For Latter-day Saints, this instruction followed a prepare-read-recall-elaborate-apply pattern. For Methodists, this instruction followed a prepare-read-elaborate/discuss-apply pattern. These models served to normalize youth into the literate practices in both denominations by providing the youth with social and cultural knowledge about the most valued texts, practices, and purposes for literacy. This Latter-day Saint community, for example, appeared to value a literal reading of scripture and engaged in a culture of listening. This Methodist community appeared to value interpreting scripture and engaged in a culture of interpretation with discussion as a key feature. Youth came to rely on these forms of instruction to develop religious literacies. Additionally, these patterns of instruction communicated to the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth how and why one reads,

writes, and engages in conversation about religious texts or issues in a community of like-minded believers.

Motivation for Literacy

By looking at religion as cultural practice, this dissertation demonstrated that youth were motivated to engage in religious literacy in religious contexts, with religious texts. Each of these domains of motivation was intertwined with the youths' cultural beliefs, values, and practices. In this section I draw them together using a dominant theoretical model of literate practice (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Ruddell and Unrau, 2004). As a review, the learner, text, and context elements of the model are represented as interlocking spheres, surrounded by a larger context. The three core elements are separated to highlight them; in theory and practice, however, they are integrated. For example, *readers* engage with *texts* in particular *contexts*, which are themselves informed by larger cultural or political *contexts*. Developing knowledge about each element of the literacy model, as well as how they interact with each other is important for understanding youths' motivation for literacy. It is critical that educators know what motivations learners bring with them into particular contexts. It is also crucial that educators know what features of specific contexts motivate youth for literacy, as well as what it is about texts that motivate youth.

With regard to religious texts, many youth were motivated to engage with them because of what they did for them. Notwithstanding the clear struggles many youth had with reading scripture, scripture provided youth with knowledge about their religious beliefs and practices and examples of how to live their lives in a manner consistent with those beliefs and practices. Religious texts also provided youth with power to face life's challenges, comfort and peace during difficult times, and connection with God. Complex texts such as scripture, it

appeared, could motivate youth to engage with them if the texts were meaningful for the youth and if the youth approached them purposefully.

Many of the youth from both denominations were also motivated for religious literacy because it was expected of them. Latter-day Saint youth, for example, held obedience in high regard and often engaged in religious literate practices because their culture expected and encouraged obedience. Methodists, however, often engaged in religious literate practice because they felt pressure, as Christians, to know the Bible better. In addition to cultural expectations, Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth were also motivated for religious literacy by the knowledge they could gain about their beliefs and the promise that it offered for salvation. Religious literate practices were one way the youth believed that they could become the people they needed to be so that, in time, they could live with God, “in the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 24:30) after mortality. This is not to say that the youth believed that simply reading (and discussing) scripture would get them to heaven; rather, through religious literate practices the youth indicated that they could develop a greater knowledge about God and the ability to love and serve God. The opportunity to know God better through religious literate practices motivated the youth to engage in those practices.

Contextual factors also motivated youth for literacy. In this study, youth from both denominations were motivated to engage in literacy in religious contexts that were safe and educative. For the Methodist youth, a safe religious context was one in which youth not only felt that they could act without judgment, but that they were among close, accepting peers where they could learn important lessons and principles about their deeply held religious beliefs. For Latter-day Saint youth, feeling the presence of Holy Ghost appeared to be an important factor in creating a safe place for religious teaching and learning. When they felt the Spirit was present, the Latter-day Saint youth indicated that they felt spiritually strong and like they were learning

important principles of their religious tradition. These contextual motivations for literacy helped to create a space where youth felt that they could – and wanted to – engage in religious conversations, religious texts, and religious issues. The fundamental principle of interaction among both denominations was their understanding of their child-parent relationship with God. As God’s children, Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth indicated that they had a responsibility to treat others well. Although this did not always happen, as captured by Melinda’s peers’ responses to her claim that Jesus was gay and the young man in the Latter-day Saint seminary class whose peers ridiculed him as he stood in the front of the class. Religious contexts were not always sacred places for religious literacy instruction and learning.

Analysis of the specific contextual, textual, and individual factors that motivated youth for literacy revealed a set of larger, superordinate themes that cross each of the aforementioned domains. Specifically, knowledge of their religious beliefs, connection with individuals and God, and feelings of security cut across and encompassed contextual factors, textual factors, and individual factors. I explain these superordinate themes in more detail below.

A Synthesis of Motivation: Knowledge, Connection, and Security

Analysis of the findings revealed three superordinate themes among the context, text, and learner domains. The first superordinate theme was the development and application of knowledge. Youth were eager to know more about their religious beliefs and traditions than they currently knew. They were also eager to apply this knowledge to their lives. Therefore, they found religious texts motivating because they were an important source of knowledge and provided models of how to live in accordance with this knowledge. Youth, likewise, found religious contexts motivating when they were educative; that is, when they helped the youth learn and apply religious beliefs and principles.

Another superordinate theme of motivation for literacy was connectivity. Some of the youth were motivated for religious literacy out of a desire to be connected with others, and with God. In religious contexts, some of the youth were motivated to engage in religious discussions because they believed these discussions developed strong, personal connections with their peers. These connections, in turn, motivated some youth to engage more personally in discussions, making the learning that occurred in religious contexts more meaningful. In addition to wanting to develop relationships with peers, some youth were motivated for literacy by the belief that they could develop stronger relationships with God, and eventually live with God. Some of the youth were also motivated to engage with scripture because they indicated that it drew them closer to God. They believed that through religious literacy they could develop the characteristics that would turn them into the people who could live with God in heaven after they died.

A third superordinate theme was the motivating force of safety. Some youth were motivated for literacy in religious contexts when contexts made them feel emotionally and socially safe; like for the Methodist youth when they could speak and act without judgment. Similarly, religious texts offered some youth a measure of security. For many of the youth, they were motivated to read and study scripture because scripture provided them with a sense of power to act in certain ways that coincided with their cultural beliefs and practices. Scripture also calmed them during troubling times and gave them a clearer view of life. In some sense, the hope of salvation may have provided some of the youth with feelings of comfort and security by offering a purpose for acting, as they believed, in faith. It may have given them hope that all of their efforts to learn and live by scripture were not in vain.

These superordinate themes suggest that many of the youth wanted to know and live their beliefs and practices, develop social (and spiritual) connections, and feel safe in their

environments and literate practices. Religious literacy, many of the youth indicated, was an important means of achieving all of these, so much so that these superordinate motivations for literacy manifest themselves across each of the three domains explored in this study. I now turn to some implications of this work for literacy research and teaching.

Implications

The results of this study provide a number of implications for literacy research, motivation for literacy research, and educational practitioners.

Literacy Research

This study supports a number of principles related to literacy, and also extends the current literacy research. Specifically, this study supports the importance of social and cultural values, beliefs, and practices in the development and exploration of literate practice. As previously identified, literacy for this study was conceptualized from a social and cultural perspective (Barton and Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Gee, 1996; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 1995). Sociocultural theorists argue that people interact with their environments through signs and tools (mediating devices) in order to construct knowledge. Literacy, language, and other “mediating devices” are tools for interacting with one’s environments that help one make sense of experiences and construct knowledge from one’s surroundings. This process, in turn, transforms thoughts and experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). From the sociocultural perspective, literacy is a tool for meaning-making in particular places, for particular purposes, for particular people (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996, 2000; Scribner and Cole, 1981).

The findings in this study extend the existing literature on religious literacies insofar as much of the existing literature attends to non-Christian youths’ religious literacies (Baquedano-Lopez, 2000; Farr, 2000; Guerra and Farr, 2002; Poveda, Cano, and Palomares-Valera, 2005; Sarroub, 2002). And the research that focuses on Christian youths’ religious literacies (Eakles,

2007; Kaptizke, 1995; Zinsser, 1986), does not attend to Latter-day Saints' or Methodists'. It is important for literacy research to develop greater knowledge about Latter-day Saints and Methodists because collectively they represent a large number of individuals with religious literate practices that literacy researchers and educators know very little about. The United Methodist Church (with an American membership of 8 million), for example, is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, after Southern Baptists (Prothero, 2007). And Mormonism is one of the fastest growing religious movements, adding members at over 50% per decade (Stark 1984/1998). Moreover, developing knowledge about Methodists and Latter-day Saints may help to shed light on other Christian religious literacy practices and develop knowledge about studying other religious traditions whose literate practices are seldom included in the research literature.

Specifically, this study contributes to the literacy research literature by demonstrating that religious literacy for Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth was embedded within the social and cultural practices, beliefs, and values of their families, their communities, and their respective religious traditions. More to the point, Latter-day Saints were influenced in their religious literate practices by the importance of knowing what scripture said. They, therefore, included practices designed to focus on memorizing scripture and recalling the events in scripture. Latter-day Saint youths' religious writing practices were also influenced by their cultural values of remembering and being remembered. Methodists, however, were influenced in their religious literate practices by the interpretation of scripture, or perhaps knowing what scripture meant. Methodists, therefore, included much discussion about scripture. Methodist youth also engaged in religious writing practices that were informed by the strong cultural history of developing strong, personal relationships. These findings are an advancement over the current literature, which has very little to say about Christian youths' religious literacy

practices, particularly Latter-day Saints' and Methodists'. These examples also demonstrate the importance of social and cultural values and beliefs in the development and use of religious literate practices, and suggest the value of exploring religious literacy as a social and cultural practice, among religious youth.

Theoretically, this study also extends the existing literature on literacy with regard to sacred texts. Texts can have powerful influences on youths' literate practices (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Black, 2007; Finders, 1996, 1997; Guzzetti and Gamboa, 2004; Heath, 1983; Lewis and Fabos, 2005; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris, 2008). Yet, extant research has not provided the field of literacy with much understanding of the role of sacred texts in youths' lives and literate practices. It is important to develop this knowledge because sacred texts are vital religious, cultural, and personal texts for people, communities, and faiths across the planet (Manseau and Sharlet, 2004; Prothero, 2007). In the embedded contexts of literacy model identified in Chapter Four I argued that the United States has a long, rich, and vibrant religious culture (Moore, 2003; Winston, 2009). An essential element of this culture is sacred texts. Speaking about the Bible in American culture, Manseau and Sharlet (2004) claim that it is everywhere:

There's no refuge from the Bible's reach. It's there in the movies you like and the books you don't. It's on our money and in our courts and in our classrooms, everywhere at once, whether you want it or not (p.4).

Because of the enormous cultural space sacred texts, such as the Bible, occupy in the United States, it behooves literacy researchers to develop more in-depth knowledge of these texts' roles in youths' literate practices. This study was a step in that direction. It demonstrated youths' conceptions of sacred texts, the place of these texts in youth' lives, and the culturally mediated practices youth used to engage with these texts. Specifically, this study contributed to

literacy research by finding that sacred texts were sacred because some of the youth highly regarded scripture's endurance through time (Methodist youth), its ability to make some youth feel better and do better in school (Latter-day Saint), and because the youth had grown up reading these texts. This study also sheds light on some of the difficulties youth had with reading scripture; namely, the linguistic difficulties, the contradictions that youth reported they had with scripture, and the contradictions that they saw within scripture. Further research could explore the specific practices religious youth employ to overcome these and other textual difficulties.

Moreover, this study contributes to the field's knowledge of the actual religious literate practices used to engage with sacred texts. Very little of the current research explores how Christian youth engage with sacred texts. This study demonstrated that scripture reading and discussing were closely connected for some youth (Methodists) in an attempt to interpret scripture, and that for other youth the value of knowing what scripture said was manifest in frequent personal reading, recalling narratives, and memorizing long passages (Latter-day Saint), all of which was consistent with the youths' cultural values and practices. Given the importance of sacred texts and the contributions this study has to make to understanding religious youths' relationship with these texts, sacred texts may be rich underdeveloped sources of future religious literacies research, particularly as they inform researchers' understanding of youths' histories of literate practices and the place of these practices in their lives.

Moreover, the extent research on youths' religious literacy practices often focuses on a single religious tradition. This study extends that by studying two Christian traditions in one community. Researching two Christian religious was helpful because it allowed for comparisons of how each congregation approached specific religious texts, such as the Bible, within a general Christian framework. The congregational differences in these youths' literate practices with regard to the Bible were highlighted because they were both using the same text, within distinct

cultural contexts. However, exploring two Christian religions – although distinct from one another – was also limited because of the similarities of their larger cultural commitments. Researchers interested in religious youths’ literate practices may find some advantage in studying congregations from more distinct religious traditions. For example, Christianity and Judaism may provide an informative pairing for study because of the distinct religious and cultural commitments and practices that each religious tradition holds with regard to the Bible/Torah, the use of scripture, and key religious traditions, such as a belief in Jesus. Studying more distinct religious traditions may allow for stronger comparisons and allow their unique religious literate practices to become more visible.

Motivation for (Religious) Literacy Research

This study supports a number of principles related to motivation for literacy, while also extending the current motivation for literacy research. Much of the current research on motivation for literacy draws from the rich motivational literature in psychology. Motivation for literacy is often conceptualized in the literature in terms of interests, goals, beliefs, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Therefore, much of the motivation for literacy work draws heavily from goal theories (Ames, 1992), self-efficacy theories (Bandura, 1997), intrinsic motivation theories (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Deci and Ryan, 1985), interest theories (Hidi, 1990; Alexander et al., 1994), and achievement motivation theories (Atkinson, 1958, 1964; Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000, 2002). For example, Guthrie et al. (1996) conceptualized motivation for reading from a goal-oriented perspective as the “internalized goals that lead to literacy choice” (p.309). Others conceptualized motivation for reading as the “development of the conditions promoting *intention* to read” where intention was the “commitment to a plan for achieving” specific reading purposes (Mathewson, 1994/2004, p.1439, italics added). Still others argued that motivation for reading included the “personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard

to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading” (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000, p.405). This dissertation supports the research indicating that motivation for literacy may be influenced by such elements as one’s interests and beliefs; however, this study also demonstrates that motivation for literacy is not based solely on elements of motivation that attend to individual psychological constructs.

The findings from this dissertation suggest that the individual is not the entire source of motivation for literacy and that motivation for literacy may be profitably studied in relationship to social and cultural beliefs, values, and practices. Viewing motivation for literacy in relationship to social and cultural influences means that motivation for literacy is not a single, universal characteristic that one does or does not possess, but rather it emerges out of and is influenced by the societies and cultures in which we exist. One is not simply motivated or not motivated for literacy; rather, one is motivated for particular activities (reading), with particular texts (the Bible), at particular times (at church), in particular ways (silently), for particular purposes (to demonstrate one’s devotion). What motivates for literacy, then, may change from one context to another and from one text to another. In this way, motivation for literacy may be best understood in particular contexts, with particular texts.

In this study motivation for literacy included reader, contextual, as well as textual factors that were often intertwined with one another in complex ways. Many of the youths’ motivations for engaging with religious texts were not inherent in the readers themselves, but developed in their interactions with the texts, in specific contexts, as informed by the cultural beliefs, values, and histories of family, congregation, and community. For example, Sarah (Methodist) was motivated to read the Bible not only because it was a source of comfort and strength, but because she often read it in socially safe and supportive contexts where she learned important lessons from it that she could apply to her life. Moreover, Sarah’s religious

tradition valued knowing scripture and being able to talk about it and relate it to one's life. Sarah also grew up with the Bible. Her parents read it to her when she was a child, and as a teenager Sarah recalled those memories with pleasure. All of this – cultural, contextual, and textual aspects – may have influenced Sarah's motivation for religious literacy. This motivation was not simply something that she did or did not have. Sarah's motivation for religious literacy was shaped over a lifetime, through various experiences with scripture in her home, at church, and by herself. In a word, this study suggests that motivation for religious literacy may be bound up in social and cultural factors that come into play as one engages with religious texts, in religious contexts. It also suggests that motivation for literacy may profitably be studied as a dynamic interaction of reader, text, and contextual elements (Moje, 2006).

That social settings can influence youths' motivations for literacy is not a new finding. Others have explored the social aspect of motivation for literacy as influenced by peers and family at school and home (Gambrell, 1996; Lapp and Fischer, 2009; McKool, 2007; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris, 2008; Strommen and Mates, 2004). Current research suggests that peers, teachers, siblings, and parents can influence youths' motivations for literacy by encouraging youth to read more (McKool, 2007), engage in conversations around reading (McKool, 2007; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris, 2008; Strommen and Mates, 2004) and provide reading recommendations (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzoni, 1996). But, to date, motivation for literacy research has not attended to religious youths' motivation for literacy in religious contexts. This study stands out in this regard. It suggests that religious contexts are rich sources for exploring the motivations that may drive many of today's youth. Specifically, this study suggests that socially secure, connected, and educative spaces can motivate youth for literacy, as these contexts cohere with cultural norms. It may behoove motivation for literacy researchers to further explore the ways in which religious contexts create these protected,

connected, educative spaces within existing cultural norms and practices. Simply in terms of numbers, motivation for literacy researchers should take note of the motivations for literacy that occur in these social/religious contexts. Roughly 26 million students are enrolled in grades 6-12 in public schools in the United States (Sable and Garofano, 2007). Of these, 70%, or over 18 million, are at least moderately involved with their religious traditions and practices (Smith and Denton, 2005). The youth in our classrooms may be influenced by the motivations for literacy developed in religious contexts. Perhaps motivation for literacy research should have more to say about the motivational aspects of these contexts.

Educational Practitioners' Work with Youth

This study indicated that a small group of religious youth was engaged in literate practices with religious texts in religious contexts, and that these texts, contexts, and practices influenced youths' motivations for religious literacy. This may be important knowledge for educators. Because religion and the accompanying values, practices, and beliefs are often fundamental aspects of individuals' identities (Baquedano-Lopez, 2000; Williams, 2005) "it is ridiculous to assume that we can keep issues of faith out of any classroom any more than we can bar other parts of students' identities" (Williams, 2005, no page). By identifying the youths' literate practices and their motivations for literacy, educators in classrooms, afterschool programs, and community and religious organizations may be better informed and prepared to develop more effective instructional practices that may advance students' literacy learning.

Motivating students for literacy. Students are seldom always or never motivated for literacy; their motivation is influenced by textual and contextual elements. In this study, the protected, socially connected, and educative qualities of religious contexts influenced youths' motivations for religious literacy because these qualities cohered with the cultural traditions, values, and beliefs of each specific congregation. To take a Methodist, for example, and put him

in a Latter-day Saint religious context may make him feel unsafe and therefore unmotivated for literacy because the Latter-day Saint contextual space may not cohere with the Methodist's cultural values, beliefs, or practices. The same principle applies to motivating other youth for literacy. Educators who wish to motivate their students for literacy in classrooms may need to know more about the cultural spaces in which their students feel (a) safe reading, writing, and speaking, (b) socially connected, and (c) like they are learning important lessons. Educators should realize that their classrooms are cultural spaces with specific practices, values, and beliefs, and that these may not cohere with the social and cultural practices, values, and beliefs their students bring with them. Considering, therefore, how educators can manage their classroom practices in such a way to help them cohere with their students' culturally mediated values, beliefs, and practices may improve students' motivations for literacy in classrooms.

Moreover, educators may want to know about important cultural texts for their students, how their students interact with these texts, and what these texts do for them. Gaining more knowledge about their students' cultural texts and textual practices can help educators create practices that motivate their students for literacy. For example, Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth were motivated for religious literacy in contexts in which they felt that what they were learning was important to them, such as principles or morals from scripture. In this study, culturally valuable texts were used to teach culturally valued lessons in culturally appropriate ways. By identifying the texts and practices that motivate youth for literacy outside of classrooms educators can draw upon them to inform classroom instruction. This may motivate youth for literacy because texts and practices in classrooms would be more clearly informed by those texts and practices that the youth value.

Choosing texts. This work also has implications for how educators go about choosing texts for use in educational contexts. The youth in this study valued certain texts more highly

than others. Scripture, for example, was a valued text for Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth. Many of them had learned to value scripture because of the positive experiences that they had with it growing up. In choosing appropriate texts, educators may want to know about their students' cultural experiences with various types of texts. What, for example, do they prefer to read on their own? Which texts trouble them? How do they (students) go about selecting the texts that they read? Which texts do they consider most valuable? These types of questions can help educators select texts that are more culturally appropriate for their students. Choosing texts for use in the classroom that are culturally appropriate can help students engage with these texts. This approach to selecting texts can also help educators demonstrate to their students that they value their experiences with texts, and the cultures that helped shape those experiences. When working with religious youth, this study suggests that scripture may be a culturally appropriate text, although approaching scripture outside of religious contexts may be problematic because youth may feel unsure or unsafe employing religious literacy practices in non-religious contexts.

Approaching texts. Because the Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth in this study valued scripture, they indicated that they often spent a great deal of time and effort reading it, understanding it, and trying to apply it. Youth from both denominations approached scripture using general models of literacy instruction. They engaged in preparing, reading, elaborating, and applying principles from scripture. Although both denominations used a similar general model, one key difference was the way each congregation approached texts. The Methodist youth, for example, read a few verses of scripture and then primarily engaged each other through discussions about the verses. The Latter-day Saint youth read up to a chapter of scripture and then often reread, recalled, and connected the passage to other passages. These youths' attitudes about scripture, the respective cultural and personal value they placed on

scripture, and their beliefs about the place of scripture in their lives may have informed how they approached scripture and their motivations for doing so.

This study suggests that educators may wish to learn about the means through which their students approach texts outside of classrooms and how these approaches are informed by their cultural and social worlds. By doing this, educators are better prepared to develop instructional methods for helping youth approach texts in ways that are informed by the youths' cultural experiences, values, and practices. For example, knowing that talking about scripture is a valued cultural literacy practice for some of the youth in their classrooms, educators may seek to utilize appropriate methods of talking in conjunction with reading to help motivate the youth for literacy. Likewise, knowing that some their students – as was the case with the youth in this study – approach texts with the purpose to learn and apply what they learn, educators may want carefully select texts with personally important lessons; furthermore, educators may seek to help students identify these lessons and engage in discussions about why they might matter for them, or others they care about.

I am not implying that educators should simply transfer youths' religious literate practices or motivations for literacy into classroom practices. Doing so would be misguided because literate practices and motivations for literacy are context dependent, which means that if they are removed from their authentic (in this case, religious) contexts and into another classroom, then “their context is inevitably transmuted; they become classroom tasks and part of the school culture” (Brown, Collings, and Duguid, 1989, p.34). The move could, therefore, alter the practices that may then have limited efficacy in student learning.

Nevertheless, educators who have religious youth in their classrooms, or who anticipate working with religious youth, need a deeper understanding of these youth, their religious literate practices, and the motivations that drive them. Since 85% of the youth in the United

States consider themselves religious (Smith and Denton, 2005), and nearly a third are actively engaged in religious practices (Smith and Denton, 2005) it would behoove educational practitioners in various domains to develop a more robust understanding of these youth who may constitute a large proportion of their student population. Moreover, given these youths' social and cultural commitments for literacy, developing a deeper understanding of religious youths' literate practices and motivations for literacy may provide valuable insight in working with other youth demonstrating strong cultural commitments for literacy, about whom we may know very little.

Latter-day Saint educators. Findings indicate that the Latter-day Saint youth in this study engaged in religious literate practices focused on reading and memorizing scripture. Very little attention was given to understanding what scripture meant, or interpreting scripture. Furthermore, the talk in this Latter-day Saint congregation appeared to be dominated by the teachers. Findings suggest that on occasion Latter-day Saint educators attempted to invite youths' interpretations of scripture; however, the youth rarely responded to these invitations with interpretations. The religious contexts appeared to be text- and teacher-focused environments. Insofar as Latter-day Saint educators value student interpretations that are consistent with the values and beliefs of their faith and this congregation, they may want to explore methods of discussion. This, however, may be difficult for Latter-day Saint youth, and perhaps teachers because of the cultural norms that appeared to limit discussion. Yet, discussions may be one way Latter-day Saint educators could advance youths' engagement and learning in Latter-day Saint religious contexts. *Any and all* interpretation may be inappropriate in this context, but *more* interpretation through discussion may be a valued addition.

One way Latter-day Saint educators could incorporate discussions into instruction is by building them into their general model of literacy instruction. Teachers could seek student

interpretations in the prepare phase by asking open-ended, interpretative questions that relate to the lesson. For example, if they were studying Exodus 16 in which Israel begins to eat manna as they travel in the desert, the teacher could begin the lesson by asking youth questions such as, “What is a miracle? How do you know when you see it? Why are their miracles? Are their different kinds of miracles? What do miracles do to you?” These sorts of questions could encourage students to venture a variety of responses that could help them interpret the events of Exodus 16 in particular culturally appropriate ways. The elaborate phrase of the instructional model could also be an appropriate place to seek student interpretation. After reading and recalling passages teachers could ask questions that explore students’ interpretations about why events occurred, how they might have occurred, and what implications they might have for the students or others. Returning to Exodus 16, Latter-day Saint educators could ask the youth why they think God gave Israel such specific instructions about gathering the manna, or what did these instructions teach Israel about their journey, or what can one learn today about God’s relationship with Israel by reading Exodus 16?

As mentioned, developing a practice of interpretation of scripture may be difficult in this particular Latter-day Saint congregation because of the cultural norms that appeared to limit youth talk; however, if approached in culturally appropriate ways such as by embedding opportunities for interpretation within a familiar model of literacy instruction discussions could be a valuable addition that may serve to motivate these youth for religious literacy by providing them opportunities for interpretation of the narratives that they often appeared to know.

Methodist educators. Findings suggest that Methodist youths’ literate practices were centered on discussions. These discussions also served to motivate youth to engage in literacy. In many ways, talk was a critical part of this Methodist congregation’s values and practices. But what about the place of reading scripture? Although it is unreasonable for one to expect the

youth to know everything about the Bible, their limited knowledge appeared to be a concern for some of the Methodist educators. On several occasions adults responsible for teaching these Methodist youth conveyed to me their worry that the youth did not know more about the Bible. During a lesson the teacher asked the youth if they knew “the David and Bathsheba story?” My field notes captured their collective response:

They look at her confusedly. [The teacher] asks again if they know the David and Bathsheba story. They stare at her blankly. [The teacher] tells the story, using the phrases “Babe alert,” and “Hot mama” several times in reference to Bathsheba. . . . The youth look very interested in the story. They are silent, looking at [the teacher] rather intently (Methodist, February 1, 2009).

After the lesson I talked with the teacher. I told her that the youth seemed very attentive when she was telling the story of David and Bathsheba. She agreed, suggesting that telling them stories from the Bible may be a good way to teach them. She then stated, “I’m surprised at how much they don’t know. . . . They know a lot about morals, but very little about the Bible.”

Analyses of the data suggest that some of the youth indeed had limited knowledge of the Bible. Alex (Methodist), for example, misrepresented an account of Jesus healing a man with palsy (Chapter Seven). Jennifer (Methodist) did not know the names of the cities that God destroyed because “people were sinning all over.” She thought it was one city. Jennifer also did not know the name of “The one father, where God is like, ‘Kill your oldest son.’” Daniel (Methodist) could not remember the name of “the story of the lost child – the two sons. Why am I blanking on that?” Although the names may not have been as important to these youth as the messages of the stories, the inability to recall proper nouns with such Christian currency as Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham and Isaac, and the Prodigal Son may have been a concern for Methodist educators.

If Methodist educators wish to expand youths' knowledge of important biblical events, then they may wish to attend to helping the youth know *what* scripture says. Findings suggest that little attention was given to the actual reading of scripture in this congregation. This may be a place to start. Youth could be encouraged to follow along as scripture is being read. They may also be encouraged to rephrase stories in their own words after reading them, or read scripture on their own in preparation for religious services. Moreover, if youth have their own copies of the scripture passages being used in religious instruction, then they could return to scripture to identify confusing parts, offer evidence in support of their interpretations, or simply reread. As these or other scripture reading practices are demonstrated, supported, and modified in this religious congregation youth may begin to see the cultural and personal value of what the Bible says. This may help them develop their knowledge of scripture.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study

This study contained some limitations that I wish to identify and briefly discuss. Following this, I provide some suggestions for future work that could extend the work presented here.

Limitations

This study was limited in a number of ways. First, this study could be more robust with an extended time frame to study the youth. Observing the youth for more than one academic year could yield important information about the long-term development and use of religious literacies and motivations for literacy. If begun early in the youths' lives, then such a study could trace the social and cultural factors that influence motivation for religious literacy and how these factors might differ in their influence over time for different youth within the same community.

Also, this study attended to religiously active youth. Yet, there are many other youth for whom religion is not as present in their lives and experiences (Smith and Denton, 2005). These youth could provide important insights into religious literate practices and motivations for literacy. Attention to youth who are less active religiously could widen the scope of research on religious literacies and motivations to address the literate and religious experiences of a broader segment of religious youth.

Another limitation of the study could have been my religious affiliation. My identity as a practicing Christian and a practicing member of the same congregation that the Latter-day Saint youth in this study attended may have lead me to more readily accept youths' perspectives, without interrogating their statements or interpretations. Moreover, some of the Latter-day Saint youth may have felt obligated to participate in the study because of our personal and/or religious associations. Methodist and Latter-day Saint youth may have also felt that I was expecting certain responses because of my religious commitments, which may have affected what they were willing to share with me during interviews, or want me to see during observations. However, my religious affiliation may have also been an affordance by allowing me insights into practicing Christian youths' literate practices and motivations, and by allowing youth to feel comfortable talking to a "believer" who they may have reasoned was more empathetic to their views.

Third, this study did not follow youth into academic contexts, nor did it seek to understand the relationship between religious literacies and motivations for literacy and academic literacies and motivations. This study is limited insofar as it cannot make claims about the relationship between these two types of literacies and motivations. Future studies could explore this issue to great advantage. Researchers could, for example, begin to see how/if religious literacies influence academic literacies, or vice versa, and to what degree. Furthermore,

researchers could begin to understand the nature of the relationship between motivations for religious literacies and academic literacies which could inform researchers' theorizations about what it is that drives students in literacy learning, inside and outside of school contexts (Hull and Schultz, 2001).

Fourth, the youth, denominations, and cultural practices in this study were contextualized by the geographic characteristics of a liberal, Midwestern college city. As identified in Chapter Four, the Methodist and Latter-day Saint youth articulated their distinct place in their respective religious traditions. Methodist youth, for example, claimed an "open-minded" perspective that may have been influenced by Greenvew City. This perspective may have been more "liberal" than other Methodist congregations, even in neighboring cities. Latter-day Saint youth articulated their distinction from other Latter-day Saint youth by being outside of Utah or the Wasatch Front in the Western United States. This study is limited, then, by the unique place that these particular Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth, their literate practices, and motivations for literacy represented. That is, these youth and their literacies and motivations may not have been representative of other Latter-day Saint or Methodist youths' literacies and motivations.

Recommendations for Further Study

Religious literacies were a critical part of these religious youths' worlds. Moreover, religiously situated motivations influenced the youths' engagement with literacy. These literate practices and motivations for literacy raise important issues that require further study.

First, what about the literate practices and motivations of religious youth who may not consider themselves highly, or actively religious? As has been mentioned, this study focused on youth who were active in their religious traditions and literate practices. Future work might profitably look at less-religiously active youths' literacies and motivations for literacy. This work

could offer important points of comparison and contrast with the current study's findings in terms of the influence of religious culture and practices on religious literacy use and development, as well as motivations for literacy. This type of work could also contribute to the development of a framework of religious literate practices and motivations for literacy for youth with varying degrees of religious activity. This could contribute important knowledge about a variety of religious youths' literate practices and may shed additional light on the varying purposes, uses, and motivations for religious literate practices.

Also, future work could explore how religious youth engage with religious texts at home, or during personal study. This would allow researchers to compare the public and private religious literate practices of religious youth. One might find important similarities and differences between these public and private literate practices, perhaps in terms of purpose, comprehension, reading practices, and use of other literate practices such as writing, speaking, or praying. This knowledge could potentially influence religious educators' use and development of literate practices in religious contexts.

Third, additional literacy or motivation for literacy researchers might wish to study particular religious traditions. This could lend itself to more in-depth analyses and provide important, more detailed findings about the cultural influences religion exerts on literacy and youths' motivation for literacy. Latter-day Saint youth, for instance, might be interesting because Mormonism is a new and rapidly growing religion that has developed interesting literate practices for youth, such as seminary, and purposes, such as young men's and young women's full-time missionary service. By studying Latter-day Saint youths' literate practices educators can begin to understand the social and cultural forces that influence the development of religious youths' literate practices near the beginning of the life of a religious tradition. This may shed some light on how these practices begin to develop, their institutional influence, and

how they change over time as a religion develops a stronger international following. Older, more established religious traditions may also be of interest for literacy and motivation for literacy researchers. Islam and Judaism, for example, may provide literacy researchers with insights into religious literacy practices that may have been shaped by cultural influences that can be identified many centuries into the past. The fields of literacy and motivation for literacy could benefit from developing a greater understanding of the historical forces, practices, values, and beliefs that influence youths' literacy and motivation for literacy. Moreover, Islam, Judaism, and other more established religious traditions, may also allow researchers to explore how demands of a modern society interact with deep, historic religious cultural practices to shape youths' religious literate practices and motivations.

Moreover, the learner-text-context theoretical model used in this study proved to be a robust tool for studying motivation for religious literacy. Currently, this model is one dominant theoretical model for literacy, but more work that utilizes the model to understand *motivation* for literacy could help create a more complete picture of important aspects of youths' motivated literacy practices, including those of religious youth. Extant motivation research looks at the motivations for literacy that youth bring with them (Baker and Wigfield, 1999; Wang and Guthrie, 2004; Wigfield and Guthrie, 1995), the contextual factors that influence motivation (Lapp and Fischer, 2009; McKool, 2007; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris, 2008; Strommen and Mates, 2004), and the textual factors that may influence motivation (Edmunds and Bauserman, 2006), but seldom has a single research study used all three of these domains to explore motivation for literacy. Such a study could deepen current knowledge about motivated literacy by providing a rich and textured portrait of youths' motivations for literacy from various perspectives.

Final Thoughts

This study drew attention to the literate practices and motivations for literacy of religious youth. As educators continue to understand the motivated literacies of youth in cultures across various communities, they may begin to develop an appreciation for the great variety of literate practices and the motivations that drive them. Educators may also develop an appreciation for the great effort youth expend to engage in these texts and practices. Literacy and motivation for literacy, in the lives of youth, are powerful forces that demand more scholarly attention, especially among populations about which we know very little, but for whom literacy is very important.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol One

Literacy and Religion

Purpose Statement & Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. This interview will help me understand how you see religion and how your religious beliefs affect what you do inside and outside of school. I want to understand your experiences as a religious teenager. There are no right or wrong answers; only what you think or feel. At any time you may decline to answer any question for any reason, or stop the interview altogether. At the end of the interview, I'll ask you to identify a pseudonym. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to start?

Conception of Religion

1. What do you think about when you hear the word *religion*?
2. What does it mean to be religious?
3. Are you religious?
 - a. How did you come to be religious?
4. How important is religion in your life?
5. What religion are you?
6. What does it mean to be a(n) __ (member of your religion) __?
 - a. How did you learn what it means to be . . . ?
7. How has being a(n) __ (member of your religion) __ influenced you?

Religious Participation (in and out of school)

1. What does it mean to "practice your religion?"
2. Do you participate in religious activities at home? (Probe: prayer, scripture, talk, etc)
 - a. Tell me about those activities.

- b. How often?
 - c. Why?
- 3. Do you participate in religious activities in your school? (Probe: prayer, scriptures, talk, etc)
 - a. Tell me about those activities.
 - b. How often?
 - c. Why?
- 4. Do you participate in religious activities through your church? (Probe: church attendance, youth groups, activities, choir, etc)
 - a. Tell me about those activities.
 - b. How often?
 - c. Why?
- 5. Overall, what do you get out of your religious participation?
- 6. Where are you most comfortable “being religious?”
 - a. Why?

Reading and Writing Outside of School

- 1. Do you read outside of school (for non-school reasons)?
 - a. What kinds of things do you read outside of school?
 - i. Why?
 - ii. How often?
 - iii. What affect do they have on you?
 - b. Do you read religious things outside of school?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - ii. What do you read?
 - iii. How often?

- iv. What do you get out of this kind of reading?
 - v. Do you read religious text the same or differently than other things?
 - 1. How so?
 - 2. Why?
 - c. Overall, how do your religious beliefs influence your reading outside of school, if at all?
2. Do you write outside of school (for non-school reasons)?
- a. What do you write outside of school?
 - i. Why do you write these things?
 - ii. How often?
 - iii. What affect do these writing have on you?
 - b. Do you write religious stuff outside of school (for non-school reasons)?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - ii. What do you write?
 - iii. How often?
 - iv. How affect you?
 - v. Do you write religious things the same or differently than other things you write?
 - 1. How so?
 - 2. Why?
 - c. Overall, how do your religious beliefs influence your out-of-school writing, if at all?

Influence of School on Religious Beliefs

- 1. How does school influence your religious beliefs?

2. How does school make you feel about yourself as a religious person?
3. Do your religious beliefs make you feel the same or different than other kids?
4. How easy or hard is it in school to be the kind of religious person that you want to be?
 - a. Can you give me an example?
5. What do you do to keep your faith strong?
6. How are religious issues treated in your school?
7. Some people think that school life and religious life can't or shouldn't go together. What do you think?
8. Complete this sentence: Being a religious person at my school is like

Influence of Religious Beliefs on School

1. Do your religious beliefs influence what you do at school?
 - a. How, or why not?
2. Do your religious beliefs influence what you choose to read for school?
 - a. How, or why not?
3. How do your religious beliefs influence *the way* you read things for school? (That is, do you read things differently because of your religious beliefs?)
4. Do your religious beliefs influence what you choose to write for school?
 - a. How, or why not?
5. How do your religious beliefs influence *the way* you write for school? (That is, do you write differently because of your religious beliefs?)
6. On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being "not at all" and 10 being "completely"), how much do your religious beliefs affect your reading, writing, and actions in school?
 - a. Explain.

Academic and Religious Goals

1. What do you want for yourself academically?
 - a. Why?
2. What do you want for yourself spiritually/religiously?
 - a. Why?
3. Do you, or do you not, see a relationship between your academic and religious goals?
 - a. Please explain.

Conclusion

1. Overall, how would you say your religious beliefs affect you in and out of school?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to say about reading, writing, or religious beliefs?
3. Some people think that youth are a bunch of raging hormones. Others think that people your age are going through phases. How do you want others to view you?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol Two

Motivated Literacy

Purpose Statement and Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me. The purpose of this interview is to understand what motivates you to read and write for school and religious purposes, and what motivates you to be involved in school and religious activities. There are no right or wrong answers; only what you think and feel. Some of the questions may sound familiar to you. As always you may refuse to answer any question for any reason. Do you have any questions before we start? Let's begin.

School Reading

1. What types of things do you read for school?

Probe: textbooks, novels, class notes, handouts, worksheets, web sites

- a. How often do you read these things?
 - b. Why do you read these things?
 - c. (optional) What do these things do for you?
2. What is the best part about these things?
 3. How much of your school reading would you do voluntarily?
 4. What is the hardest part about your school reading?
 - a. How do you deal with the hard parts?

Religious Reading

5. What types of things do you read as part of your religion?

Probe: scriptures, scriptural commentary, web sites, reference books

- a. How often do you read religious things?
- b. Why do you read these things?
- c. (optional) What do these things do for you?

6. What is the best part about these things?
7. How much of your religious reading would you do voluntarily?
8. What is the hardest part about your religious reading?
 - a. How do you deal with the hard parts?

School Writing

9. What types of things do you write for school?

Probe: term papers, class notes, homework

 - a. How often do you write for school?
 - b. Why do you write these things?
 - c. (optional) What does writing these things do for you?
10. What is the best part about writing these things?
11. How much of your school writing would you do voluntarily?
12. What is the hardest part about your school writing?
 - a. How do you deal with the hard parts?

Religious Writing

13. What types of things do you write for religious purposes?

Probe: journals, essays,

 - a. How often do you write for religious purposes?
 - b. Why do you write these things?
 - c. (optional) What does writing these things do for you?
14. What is the best part about writing these things?
15. What is the hardest part about your religious writing?
 - a. How do you deal with the hard parts?

School Activities

16. How would you describe school?
17. What types of activities are you involved in for school?
 - a. Why do you participate?
 - b. (optional) What do you get out of these activities?

Religious Activities

18. How would you describe your religion?
19. What types of activities are you involved in for church?
20. LDS: Tell me about seminary.
 - a. Why do you go?
 - b. (optional) What do you get out of it?
21. LDS: Tell me about church.
 - a. Why do you go?
 - b. (optional) what do you get out of it?
22. FUMC: Tell me about Sol Café.
 - a. Why do you go?
 - b. (optional) What do you get out of it?
23. FUMC: Tell me about Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF).
 - a. Why do you go?
 - b. (optional) What do you get out of it?
24. FUMC: Tell me about mission trips
 - a. Why do you go?
 - b. (optional) What do you get out of them?

Conclusion

25. Is there anything else you'd like to say about why you read or write for school or religious purpose?
26. Is there anything else you'd like to say about why you're involved in school or religious activities?

Appendix C: Interview Protocol Three

Discussions and Conceptions of the Sacred

Purpose Statement and Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me. The purpose of this interview is to learn more about the discussions that take place in church and during church activities. I also want to understand what things are sacred to you. There are no right or wrong answers; only what you think and feel. As always, you may refuse to answer any question for any reason. Do you have any questions before we start? Let's begin.

Discussions

1. Tell me about the discussions that take place in (Sunday school or Sol Cafe, seminary, MYF).
 - a. Why do they work, or don't work?
2. How important are these discussions to you?
3. Do you feel comfortable talking in these groups?
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. *Optional:* Are there times that you don't feel comfortable talking?
4. What are some things that someone shouldn't or can't say in these discussions?
 - a. Can you give me an example of a time when someone said something that shouldn't have been said?
5. Are there times that you don't agree with what's being said?
 - a. If so, what do you do about it?
 - b. What do others do?
6. What sort of disagreement is allowed in these discussions?
 - a. Can you tell me about a time someone voiced a disagreement?

7. What do you get out of these discussions?
8. Are there times that you don't agree with what you read in the scriptures or other religious texts?
 - a. If so, tell me about a time?
 - b. If so, what do you do?

Exploring the Sacred

9. How important is the Bible/Book of Mormon to you?
 - a. Why is that?
10. Are there other texts that are *as or more important* to you than the Bible/Book of Mormon?
 - a. If so, what are they?
 - b. If so, tell me about them.
 - a. If not, why not?
11. What are some texts that you find offensive?
 - a. Why are they offensive?
 - b. How did you come in contact with these texts?
12. What are some of the important things that you do in an average week?
13. How do these things compare in importance to your religious practices?
 - a. Why is that?
 - b. Do you approach these (everyday and religious) practices the same or differently?

Additional Measures of Religiosity

14. How committed are you to the specific (FUMC or LDS) religious beliefs?
15. If it were entirely up to you, would you go to church?

a. Why, or why not?

16. If it were entirely up to you, would you go to other religious activities?

a. Why, or why not?

Conclusion

17. Is there anything you would like to say about discussion in church or your ideas about what is sacred or profane (offensive)?

Appendix D: Observation Protocol

Purpose Statement & Introduction

The purpose of this observation protocol is to identify what is going on during the observations and how it influences these youths' motivation for literacy. The following questions guide this protocol: *Who* are the participants? *Where* are they? *What* are they *doing*? *How* are they doing it? How do they *interact* with each other? To what *effect*?

Who are the participants?

Who is in attendance? How many youth and adults? What are their physical characteristics, including dress and overall appearance? What are their personal traits?

Where are they?

Describe the physical location. What are the arrangement of objects and people? What characteristics of the context appear to influence (encourage or limit) motivation for literacy?

What are they doing?

What is the nature of the activities? What objects (texts) are being used? How are they being used? Who is participating? Who is not? How do individuals respond? How do activities appear to influence (encourage or limit) youths' motivation for literacy?

How do they interact?

How do the youth and adults participate in the activities/instruction? How do the youth and adults interact with each other? (This includes verbal interaction, proximity, physical interaction (contact), and non-verbal interaction.) And how does this interaction appear to influence (encourage or limit) youths' motivation for literacy?

To what effect?

What influence do the contexts, texts, and individuals have on the participants? What helps explain why these youth engage in meaning-making practices?

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