https://doi.org/10.62370/hbds.v26i3.279189

*Human Behavior, Development and Society*
E-ISSN 2651-1762, Vol 26 No 3, December 2025

# Spiritual Identity Formation of Non-Adventist Individuals in a Faith-based Higher Education Institution in Thailand

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Date Received: 20 February 2025 Revised: 8 July 2025 Accepted: 13 August 2025

**Paper Type:** Original Research

## Abstract

**Aim/Purpose:** This study aimed to explore the influence of religion on the identity formation of individuals, particularly within the context of higher education. Specifically, it sought to investigate how religious beliefs influence one's pursuit of meaning, purpose, and a unified sense of self. As identity development is a critical task during young adulthood, particularly among university students, the study examined how spiritual transformation and faith-based affiliation play an integral role in shaping individual identity.

**Introduction/Background:** Identity formation is a developmental process through which individuals come to understand who they are in relation to the world around them. It encompasses multiple dimensions, including personal values, social roles, and future aspirations. Religion, as a powerful socio-cultural and personal force, has been widely acknowledged in scholarly literature as a significant factor in this process. Religious belief systems provide moral frameworks, community support, and existential meaning, which can guide individuals through periods of uncertainty and self-exploration. In faith-based educational institutions, students are often immersed in an environment that actively promotes spiritual development alongside academic learning. Such settings provide opportunities for students to explore religious teachings, participate in faith-based activities, and form relationships with others who model religious commitment. These influences may contribute to the shaping of both spiritual and non-spiritual dimensions of identity. However, research on the specific mechanisms through which religion influences identity formation remains limited, particularly in non-Western contexts. This study addresses that gap by examining how exposure to religious beliefs and practices within an educational setting contributes to the development of identity.

**Methodology:** This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design, using purposive sampling to select participants who had undergone a religious transformation during their time in a faith-based academic environment. Three individuals who had previously identified as spiritual seekers and later committed to a specific faith tradition were invited to participate in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The guiding questions focused on participants' pre-conversion experiences, the process of learning about the religion, their decision to join the faith community through baptism, and how their identities had changed since their religious commitment. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. The data were coded to identify recurring patterns and categorized into three key stages: pre-conversion searching, religious engagement and transformation, and post-conversion identity integration. This framework was used to trace the progression of spiritual influence on the participants' self-concepts and personal development.

**Findings:** Participants described their initial state as one of inner conflict, characterized by a profound yearning for peace, healing, and clarity of life direction. They reported feeling spiritually disconnected and searching for answers that they believed could not be found through secular means. This phase was marked by emotional vulnerability and openness to new perspectives. The second stage of the journey began when participants encountered individuals within the religious community whose lives and values made a lasting impression. Through these interpersonal connections, they were introduced

to religious teachings, community activities, and structured spiritual practices. As participants engaged more deeply with religious texts and communal worship, they reported growing clarity, emotional stability, and a sense of belonging. This phase culminated in their decision to undergo baptism, symbolizing a formal commitment to the faith. In the post-conversion stage, participants experienced a reorientation of their identity across multiple dimensions. Spiritually, they described a deeper relationship with a higher power and increased commitment to religious practices. Mentally, they noted greater peace of mind, moral clarity, and purpose. Socially, they developed stronger, values-aligned relationships. Physically, some participants reported lifestyle changes inspired by religious teachings on health and wellness. These transformations were described as rapid and noticeable, occurring within a relatively short period after conversion.

**Contribution/Impact on Society:** The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted role of religion in identity formation. Religious involvement not only shapes spiritual beliefs, but also influences mental health, social relationships, and behavioral patterns. In a broader societal context, this highlights the potential of faith-based communities and institutions to promote holistic personal development, particularly among young adults navigating transitional life stages. The study also brings attention to the role of lived experiences—such as interpersonal relationships and community engagement—in encouraging religious exploration and identity consolidation.

**Recommendations:** Given the powerful role that religion can play in identity formation, educators and leaders within faith-based institutions should intentionally cultivate environments that encourage open dialogue, reflection, and authentic spiritual experiences. Mentorship programs, religious study groups, and values-driven campus life initiatives can serve as effective platforms for supporting students' identity development. Moreover, curriculum designers should consider integrating discussions on spirituality, ethics, and personal growth into academic programs to promote well-rounded development.

**Research Limitations:** One limitation of this study was its small sample size, consisting of only three participants, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused on a single religious tradition and took place within a particular type of educational institution, which may not reflect the experiences of individuals in other contexts or faiths. Social desirability bias may also have influenced participants' responses, given the spiritual nature of the subject.

**Future Research:** Future studies could expand this research by including a more diverse participant pool across different faith-based affiliations and institutional settings. Longitudinal studies could also provide deeper insights into how religious identity evolves over time. Comparative studies between faith-based and secular institutions may further illuminate the distinct ways that environments shape identity development. Integrating quantitative measures alongside qualitative narratives could also enhance the robustness of findings.

**Keywords:** *Identity formation, non-Adventist individual, spiritual identity, faith-based institution*

**Introduction**

Identity formation is a core developmental process, particularly during adolescence and transitional periods. Crocetti (2017) has emphasized that individuals must establish a clear and stable sense of self, especially when encountering new experiences that challenge their existing beliefs and values. This process is even more complex within faith-based institutions of higher education, where institutional values and religious teachings shape students' personal and social identities.

Religion significantly influences identity formation by providing a framework for moral values and behavioral norms (Dillon, 2003). It serves as a guiding force in individuals' lives, shaping their sense of belonging and personal meaning. King (2003) noted that religion provides a transcendent worldview that helps individuals make sense of their experiences, guiding their personal and social interactions.

In the context of Seventh-day Adventist institutions, religious beliefs and values are deeply embedded in educational structures and social environments. The Adventist Church, which emphasizes Bible-based education, aims to instill Christian principles in students' character development (Rieger, 2023). These institutions focus on holistic education—spiritually, mentally, and physically—believing that personal well-being enhances spiritual growth (The General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2023). However, non-Adventist students studying in these institutions encounter unique challenges in navigating their identities within a predominantly Adventist culture.

**Review of Literature**

Understanding how spiritual identity is formed is a complex and ongoing process that draws from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, theology, and education. Religious identity involves more than formal affiliation or ritual participation, it includes deeply held beliefs, personal values, social belonging, and an understanding of one's place in the world. In educational environments with a strong religious foundation, such as Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) institutions, identity formation becomes particularly pronounced since religious values are embedded into daily practices, institutional culture, and academic instruction. For non-Adventist students, engaging with a dominant faith tradition can present both opportunities for growth and challenges to their sense of belonging, belief, and adaptation.

Fowler's (1981) theory of faith development emphasized that spiritual identity evolves through developmental stages, shaped by life experiences and meaning making. Parks (2000) similarly highlighted that in young adulthood, especially within higher education; students seek coherence, purpose, and spiritual mentors. King and Boyatzis (2004) affirmed that spiritual development during adolescence and emerging adulthood involves the dynamic interplay of internal reflection and social environments. However, this journey is not always smooth. Cohen et al. (2005) contended that spiritual transformation can involve emotional struggles, dissonance, and discomfort, which are integral to authentic growth. Sremac and Ganzevoort (2013) emphasized that spiritual transformation often emerges from personal crises or trauma, serving as a foundation for renewed identity and meaning making. Together, these perspectives underscore that spiritual identity is shaped through both nurture and disruption, calling for supportive, reflective environments, particularly within faith-based institutions.

***The Role of Institutions***

Schools and universities have a major influence on how students grow and think about who they are. Christian colleges, for example, are sometimes called "moral communities" where values and beliefs are part of everyday life (Davignon & Thomson, 2015). This kind of environment affects students in many ways—through chapel services, classroom discussions, school rules, and how the school expects students to behave.

At SDA schools, Adventist beliefs are integrated into the curriculum and the way people are expected to live. This kind of setting can help Adventist students feel supported in their faith. But for students who are not Adventist, this experience can be mixed. On the one hand, they might find new ideas that help them grow. On the other hand, they might feel as though they don't completely belong, or are being pressured to change their beliefs.

Tolman et al. (2021) explained that teachers and staff in faith-based schools play an important role. They don't just teach; they also act as role models. This means that students may look up to them not only for knowledge, but also for how they live their faith. For non-Adventist students, this can feel like quiet pressure to conform to the same beliefs, which can affect how freely they can be themselves.

***Being in the Minority***

For non-Adventist students, going to an Adventist school means being part of a smaller group with different beliefs. This can be both helpful and difficult. Some students enjoy learning about Adventist

ideas and may grow in their own spiritual lives. Some may even choose to become Adventists. But others might feel left out, especially if most events and conversations focus exclusively on Adventist beliefs (Fan et al., 2021).

Thomson and Davignon (2017) found that when there is more religious and political variety among students, it can help students understand other people better. But this can also make some feel different or even uncomfortable, especially if their views aren't welcomed or talked about.

Friends are a big part of school life. It can be hard for students from different religious backgrounds to find close friends when many social activities are centered around faith—like prayer groups, worship services, or church-related trips (Uecker, 2008). This can make some students feel left out and affect their perception of their place in the school.

***Teachers and the Curriculum***

In faith-based schools, teachers often have more than one role. They teach their subjects, but they also share the school's values and faith with their students. Cohen-Malayev et al. (2014) found that teachers can help students find meaning in religion by the way they act and what they say in class.

In SDA schools, religious ideas are sometimes incorporated into subjects such as science, history, or literature. When students disagree with what is being taught, they may stop paying attention or feel disconnected (Barnes et al., 2017). They might not speak up in class if they feel their views will not be accepted or respected.

***Influence of the Family***

Even though schools have a big impact, the family still plays a major role in shaping religious beliefs. D'Angelo et al. (2023) showed that when parents trust a faith-based school, it can help students to grow both spiritually and academically. This means students from religious homes, whether they are Adventist or not, may find some parts of faith-based school life familiar or helpful.

Gemar (2023) pointed out that children often follow the religion of their parents. But when they go to school, they may start to question or compare their own beliefs to those they hear in the classroom or in chapel. Some hold firmly to their family's beliefs, while others may feel unsure or confused.

***Emotional and Personal Experiences***

Building a religious identity is not just a social process; it also affects how students feel inside. Niens et al. (2012) found that when students feel like they don't fit in or are left out because of their beliefs, this can lead to stress or worry. This is especially true during the college years, which are already a time of change and growth.

Vignoles (2017) described identity development as a process that includes asking questions, going through struggles, and eventually making decisions about who you are. Para (2008) supported this idea, saying that sometimes young people must go through hard times before they really know what they believe.

de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. (2021) noted that students from very religious backgrounds may feel even more tension if they find themselves in an environment where people hold different beliefs. This can either strengthen their beliefs or leave them feeling uncertain and unsure about their faith.

***Culture and Society***

Religious identity is also shaped by what's going on in the wider culture. Komakhidze and Fatemi (2021) studied Yezidi women in Eastern Europe and found that their religious beliefs were affected by changes in politics and society. In the same way, students in Adventist schools are not only shaped by their schools, but also by their own backgrounds, home countries, and the way religion is seen in their communities.

Amini and Nguyen (2021) found that Muslim and Jewish students in the U.S. often had to balance their religious beliefs with their desire to fit into American society. This is like what non-Adventist

students go through when they try to stay true to their beliefs while studying in a school where most people are Adventist.

### *School Goals and Student Growth*

Even with these challenges, Adventist schools try to help students grow in all areas—mentally, physically, and spiritually. Emiroğlu (2020) stated that religious identity is shaped by both personal experience and the group to which one belongs. Adventist schools aim to instill values such as service, healthy living, and virtuous character traits (Kitjaroonchai & Hungyo, 2017). These values can be helpful for all students, not just Adventists.

The SDA Church (2023) states that its schools aim to prepare students to live with purpose and to be helpful to others. While these goals work well for students who are already Adventist, students from other religions may feel unsure about how they fit into this picture. Still, some may find the focus on values and character meaningful and decide to grow in their own ways.

To sum it up, the religious identity of non-Adventist students in Adventist schools is shaped by various factors, including school rules, teachers, friends, family, emotions, and the world around them. Some students may feel that school helps them grow, while others may feel unsure or left out. More research is needed to understand their experiences better, and to find ways for schools to support all students regardless of their faith.

This study was guided by two key frameworks: (a) Marcia's (1966, 1980) Theory of Identity Status, and (b) Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) Ecological Systems Theory. Marcia conceptualized identity development as a dynamic process involving exploration and commitment, a perspective particularly useful for understanding how students negotiate and redefine their religious identities in a faith-based educational setting. Complementing this, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes that identity formation occurs within nested systems of influence—ranging from immediate contexts such as peers, teachers, and family to broader institutional and cultural structures.

Together, these theories help explain how non-Adventist students experience and interpret spiritual transformation as they interact with the religious environment at an Adventist university. They also provide a foundation for analyzing how internal meaning-making and external influences shape identity development.

## Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to explore the identity formation experiences of non-Adventist students in a Seventh-day Adventist institution of higher education. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Identify the key factors that shape non-Adventist students' religious and personal identities.
2. Examine the challenges and opportunities that these students encountered during their identity formation process.
3. Analyze the role of institutional culture and environment in influencing their spiritual and personal development**.**

## Methodology

In this study, a qualitative phenomenological research approach was employed**,** utilizing semi-structured interviews and thematic coding to explore the identity formation experiences of individuals before, during, and after their baptism into the Adventist denomination. We aimed to understand the personal transformation process influenced by the institutional environment at an Adventist international university, and how participants integrated Adventist beliefs into their identities.

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who met the following criteria: they had to be baptized members of the Adventist denomination, their decision to be baptized had to be influenced by an Adventist international university, and they were willing to participate in interviews and share their experiences. Three participants were selected, each having come from a different religious background prior to their baptism. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants.

**Table 1** *Overview of Participants*

| Participant | Prior Religious Background | Current Status | Baptism Year |
|---|---|---|---|
| **P1** | Christian, non-religious | AIU Master's student, AIU Bachelor's graduate | 2023 |
| **P2** | Buddhist | AIU senior undergraduate student | 2022 |
| **P3** | Born to Adventist parents | Member of AIU University Chorale | 2023 |

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to freely express their experiences. The interview questions focused on three key phases of identity formation: before baptism, during the conversion process, and after baptism. The "before" section explored participants' religious backgrounds, beliefs, and values prior to their exposure to Adventism. The "during" section examined the factors at an Adventist international university that influenced their decision to be baptized, including religious teachings, social interactions, and institutional culture. Finally, the "after" section investigated how baptism impacted their identity, religious commitment, and social integration within the Adventist community. Participants were asked nine main questions, with additional follow-up questions tailored to their responses for a deeper understanding of their identity formation.

For data analysis, responses were categorized into three chronological themes: before baptism, during the conversion process, and after baptism. This thematic coding approach enabled a structured analysis of participants' transformation, allowing for a clearer understanding of how their beliefs and identities evolved over time. By organizing data chronologically rather than thematically, the study ensured that participants' religious journeys were analyzed as continuous experiences, rather than as isolated events.

This methodological approach provided valuable insights into how non-Adventist individuals have navigated the transformation of their religious identity in a faith-based higher education setting.

**Findings**

The findings illustrate the transformative journey of participants, highlighting key themes such as personal search for meaning, the influence of religious environment, emotional and psychological impact, social reinforcement, and long-term changes in behavior and decision-making.

*1. Stages of Religious Identity Transformation*

Participants experienced religious identity transformation through various stages, moving from initial curiosity to full integration of Adventist beliefs; these stages are shown below in Table 2. Their journeys were characterized by exposure to new religious perspectives, active engagement in spiritual activities, and eventual internalization of faith-based values.

**Table 2** *Identity Transformation Stages*

| Identity Stage | Key Characteristics |
|---|---|
| **Pre-Adventist** | Uncertainty, search for purpose, limited religious involvement, exposure to secular influences |
| **Transitional** | Exposure to Adventist teachings, questioning of previous beliefs, increased engagement in religious discussions, attendance at spiritual gatherings |
| **Post-Adventist** | Stronger faith commitment, inner peace, deeper integration of religious values into daily life, increased participation in community and faith-based activities |

*2. Psychological and Social Impact of Religious Identity Transformation*

Participants reported profound psychological and social changes throughout their transformation. One participant described some initial skepticism, stating: *"I grew up in a non-religious household where faith was never discussed. When I first arrived at* the Adventist international university*, I felt out of place among religious peers. However, as I attended Bible studies and engaged in discussions, I*

*started to reconsider my views."* This aligns with studies on religious identity formation, which suggest that exposure to structured faith-based communities can prompt cognitive and emotional exploration (Smith & Denton, 2005).

Another participant shared being rocked byemotional turmoil before transformation ensued: *"I had a lot of unresolved anxiety and lacked direction. Seeing how my Adventist friends carried themselves with purpose made me curious. I initially resisted, but over time, I found peace in learning about the faith."* This demonstrated how social environments may act as catalysts for religious engagement and identity development (King & Furrow, 2004).

Participants also reported significant improvements in their interpersonal relationships. One individual expressed: *"Before I accepted Adventist beliefs, I was socially disconnected. But once I embraced the faith, I became part of a supportive community that shared my values and encouraged me."* This corresponds with research indicating that religious communities provide strong social support networks, fostering emotional resilience and belonging (Dillon, 2003).

*3. Behavioral and Lifestyle Changes*

As participants transitioned into their new religious identity, their behaviors and daily routines changed significantly. These transformations were reflected in lifestyle choices, moral reasoning, and career aspirations; details are shown below in Table 3.

**Table 3** *Changes in Daily Life Before and After Adventist Influence*

| Aspect | Pre-Adventist | Post-Adventist |
|---|---|---|
| **Daily Routine** | Irregular schedule, lack of structure | Regular prayer, Bible study, community engagement |
| **Social Interactions** | Limited, superficial friendships | Meaningful relationships, mentorship, and community involvement |
| **Decision Making** | Influenced by personal desires, societal norms | Guided by faith-based values, ethical considerations |
| **Mental Well-being** | Anxiety, uncertainty | Inner peace, purpose-driven mindset |

One participant reflected on behavioral changes: *"I used to be indifferent about my choices, but now I evaluate them through a moral lens. Faith has given me a sense of responsibility and clarity."* This observation was supported by previous studies which have indicated that religious commitment fosters ethical decision-making and a greater sense of accountability (McAdams & Pals, 2006).

Another participant commented on how faith had influenced personal academic and professional aspirations: *"I initially pursued a career for financial stability, but after my conversion, I realized I wanted to make a meaningful impact. My faith now guides my ambitions."* This demonstrated how religious identity formation extends beyond spiritual beliefs, shaping career choices and life trajectories (Astin et al., 2011).

*4. Emotional Stability and Sense of Purpose*

All participants reported an enhanced sense of purpose and emotional stability after adopting Adventist beliefs. One participant stated: *"I no longer feel like I'm drifting through life. My faith has given me purpose, and I approach challenges with confidence."* This is aligned with findings by Cucchi and Qoronfleh (2025), who emphasized that religious and spiritual frameworks offer individuals a sense of meaning and emotional resilience, particularly in culturally immersive environments. Similarly, Aggarwal et al. (2023) found that religiosity and spirituality play a protective role in mental health, contributing to reduced anxiety and depression, especially among young people.

Overall, the findings indicated that religious identity transformation was not merely a change in beliefs, but a holistic shift in emotional, social, and behavioral dimensions. This transformation was aligned with existing literature on the role of faith in identity construction and well-being, reinforcing the notion that faith-based environments offer both psychological and social benefits.

**Discussion**

This study offers significant insights into the dynamics of religious identity formation among non-Adventist students immersed in a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) higher educational context. It contributes to the broader discourse by illustrating how sustained engagement with a faith-based institution may catalyze spiritual, moral, and psychological transformation, particularly in individuals navigating an unfamiliar faith-based environment.

Consistent with existing scholarship (King & Furrow, 2004; Smith & Denton, 2005), the findings confirmed that faith-based institutions function as powerful agents of identity construction, offering both ideological frameworks and relational scaffolding. However, this study extends prior work by emphasizing the distinct influence of an Adventist institutional ethos, particularly its holistic educational philosophy, integration of faith and learning, and moral expectations, on non-Adventist students. The Adventist international context provides structured opportunities for spiritual reflection, identity exploration, and value reorientation. This aligns with White's (1903) foundational assertion that character formation is central to faith-based education and resonates with Rieger's (2023) argument that intentional faith-based environments nurture moral discernment and personal growth.

Notably, participants reported a deepened sense of spiritual awareness, accompanied by emotional and psychological development. Their testimonies of increased inner peace, clarity, and purpose corroborated Smith et al.'s (1999) findings on the psychological benefits of a strong religious identity. King (2003) similarly noted that religious worldviews provide a coherent interpretive lens for making sense of life's challenges, contributing to emotional resilience and social orientation. One participant's remark: "*Before I committed to my faith, I constantly felt lost. Now, I feel anchored in something greater than myself*"—captures how spiritual commitment can anchor one's broader sense of self.

The relational and communal dimensions of religious identity formation also emerged as pivotal. Friendships with Adventist peers, faculty mentorship, and active participation in spiritual programs played a formative role. These findings aligned with Dillon's (2003) assertion that religious communities serve as primary contexts for negotiating and internalizing belief systems. Within such moral communities (Davignon & Thomson, 2015), the social reinforcement of shared values fosters continuity, belonging, and conviction. For non-Adventist students, the experience of being surrounded by a dominant religious culture presented both opportunities for transformation and challenges related to social integration.

Indeed, the dual experience of inclusion and marginalization was salient. While some students described enriching encounters with Adventist values and practices, others reported moments of dissonance, particularly around perceived expectations to conform. This tension reflected findings by Fan et al. (2021), who noted that religious minority students in faith-based institutions often struggle with cultural fit and belonging. Uecker (2008) further highlighted that limited access to religiously similar peer groups may hinder social support and exploration. Despite these tensions, the exposure to differing beliefs appeared to foster religious literacy and interfaith empathy (Edwards, 2024), reinforcing the educational value of pluralistic engagement, even within confessional institutions.

The role of faculty as moral and spiritual exemplars was another key finding. Participants consistently highlighted teachers as influential figures, often shaping their ethical reasoning and spiritual understanding more than familial or peer influences. This supported Cohen-Malayev et al.'s (2014) conclusion that educators in faith-based settings significantly contribute to students' religious socialization. However, for some non-Adventist students, curricular content grounded in biblical worldviews posed challenges to academic engagement, particularly when conflicting with pre-existing beliefs (Barnes et al., 2017). Nevertheless, as Kitjaroonchai and Hungyo (2017) argued, the Adventist educational framework—through its integration of faith, learning, and service—promotes transformative outcomes that transcend doctrinal instruction.

Furthermore, identity transformation extended beyond the spiritual domain into behavioral and vocational realms. Participants described shifts in ethical decision-making, lifestyle choices, and career

aspirations toward service-oriented paths. This finding resonated with McAdams and Pals' (2006) model of narrative identity, which emphasizes the interplay between personal values, life purpose, and identity continuity. One student's reflection: "*I used to make decisions based purely on personal gain, but my faith has taught me the importance of making choices that align with higher values*", illustrated the long-term behavioral implications of internalized religious identity.

Adolescence and young adulthood are critical periods for identity consolidation, particularly when individuals are exposed to new ideational and cultural frameworks. Crocetti (2017) underscored the developmental necessity of navigating tensions between continuity and change, especially in ideologically charged contexts. Adventist education, with its holistic focus on intellectual, physical, and spiritual development, positions itself to guide this process intentionally (Rieger, 2023; The General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2023).

Parental influence, while not a central focus of this study, emerged as an indirect factor. D'Angelo et al. (2023) noted that parental trust in faith-based institutions significantly shapes students' openness to religious formation and perceived academic value. The decision of many non-Adventist parents to enroll their children in faith-based institutions—despite differing personal beliefs—reflects a broader societal recognition of the moral and developmental benefits offered by such settings (Rieger, 2023).

The identity development process described by participants reflected a pattern of active exploration followed by commitment, consistent with the Identity Status model (Iwasa et al., 2023). This process was not without internal conflict. Participants navigated tensions between inherited beliefs and institutional norms, highlighting the emotional complexity of identity negotiation (Para, 2008). In a faith-based academic setting, where personal and communal expectations often converge, the stakes of this negotiation are amplified.

Finally, this study reaffirms the transformative potential of faith-based higher education. Religious identity, as Emiroğlu (2020) emphasizes, is co-constructed through individual agency and communal reinforcement. Adventist institutions—through their emphasis on community service, healthful living, and mission—offer students a framework for meaning-making that transcends doctrinal adherence. The findings suggest that such environments can nurture holistic identity development, equipping students—regardless of faith background—with tools for purposeful living and ethical engagement with the world.

**Implications of the Study**

This study has several important implications for faith-based institutions, educators, and individuals navigating identity formation. First, the findings suggest that faith-based institutions should continue fostering environments that encourage open dialogue, reflection, and engagement with faith. Structured mentorship programs, discussion forums, and spiritual retreats could further enhance the identity formation process for individuals exploring religious beliefs.

Second, for educators, integrating faith-based learning within academic settings can contribute to holistic student development. The study indicates that a combination of academic rigor and spiritual engagement fosters critical thinking, self-awareness, and ethical decision-making. Universities should consider incorporating interdisciplinary approaches that allow students to explore the intersection of faith, personal identity, and professional aspirations.

Third, the study highlights the significance of social support systems in religious identity formation. Faith-based organizations should emphasize the role of peer mentorship, community activities, and group discussions to facilitate deeper engagement with religious teachings. Individuals undergoing religious transformation benefit from being part of a nurturing environment that encourages spiritual growth.

Lastly, for individuals seeking personal transformation, this study underscores the value of self-reflection and openness to new perspectives. Participants' experiences suggested that engaging with faith-based communities can provide guidance, emotional stability, and a stronger sense of purpose. These insights are relevant not only for religious seekers, but also for counselors and spiritual advisors working with individuals who are undergoing major identity shifts.

Additionally, the findings suggest a need for faith-based institutions to intentionally promote inclusivity alongside spiritual formation. While participants benefitted from structured spiritual programming, non-Adventist students may require tailored support as they navigate a dominant religious culture. Institutions can foster a more inclusive environment by offering optional interfaith dialogue, creating safe spaces for religious questioning, and training faculty in culturally responsive and inclusive practices. These strategies can ensure that all students—regardless of background—feel respected, supported, and spiritually engaged.

Ellen G. White (1903) emphasized that "true education means more than pursuing a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being..." (p. 13). She advocated for an approach that cultivates individual conscience and character through love and patience, not compulsion. In this spirit, creating welcoming, grace-filled spaces for all students is aligned with the Adventist philosophy of education, which seeks to draw learners to Christ by "the power of love" rather than through pressure to conform (White, 1898).

**Conclusion**

This study underscores the vital influence of faith-based institutions in the complex process of identity formation, particularly among individuals who do not share the foundational faith of their host institution. The narratives of non-Adventist students at an Adventist international university revealed that immersion in a structured, values-oriented faith-based environment facilitates more than just spiritual engagement, it fosters a profound reconfiguration of personal identity. Participants' experiences demonstrated that faith-based settings offered not only a framework for belief, but also a foundation for emotional stability, moral reasoning, and social integration. Such transformation was often gradual, emerging from repeated exposure to faith-informed practices, consistent ethical modeling by mentors, and the supportive infrastructure of a spiritual community.

The findings resonate with well-established psychological and sociological theories of identity development, particularly those emphasizing the interplay between environmental contexts and internal processes of self-construction. In this case, the institutional culture of the Adventist international university—marked by intentional spiritual programming, communal worship, and values-based education—acted as a crucible for the re-evaluation of personal beliefs and behaviors. Importantly, the study highlights the agency of the individual within these contexts, showing that identity formation is neither passive nor imposed, but emerges through reflective engagement and interpersonal relationships. The presence of compassionate mentorship, inclusive faith practices, and open dialogue appears especially critical in enabling students to explore, question, and sometimes adopt new religious identities.

Moreover, this research affirms the significance of belonging and purpose within identity development. For many participants, integration into the university's faith-based community not only addressed existential questions but also provided a renewed sense of direction and meaning. These outcomes suggest that Adventist institutions serve as incubators for the holistic development of individuals, nurturing their ethical convictions, emotional resilience, and social consciousness.

While the scope of this study was limited to one institutional context, its implications extend to broader discourses on religious pluralism, educational missions, and the transformative potential of faith in multicultural settings. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to trace the durability of religious identity beyond the university setting. Additionally, cross-institutional comparisons involving various denominational affiliations could illuminate the unique and shared mechanisms through which faith-based education shapes the self. Attention should also be given to the tensions or negotiations that individuals may experience when reconciling prior beliefs with newly adopted religious perspectives.

In conclusion, the findings presented here advocate for the intentional design of inclusive faith-based environments that nurture personal growth, respect diversity, and encourage critical reflection. As identity formation continues well beyond formal education, ongoing scholarly engagement with the intersection of faith, education, and personal development remains essential. Such inquiry not

only enhances our understanding of how faith-based affiliation is internalized but also informs institutional practices that aim to support the spiritual and moral trajectories of all learners, regardless of their initial faith backgrounds.

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