

Article

The Spirituality of Deconstruction in United States Theological Schools

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Abstract: Building on a movement within the sociology of religion to better situate studies of spirituality in relation to contexts, practices, and power relations, the current study examines shifts in spiritual practice associated with “deconstruction” among graduate students within theological education. We rely on new interview data with a cohort of 30 students at time 1 (2020) and follow-ups with 22 of those students at time 2 (2022), comparing students at four different types of schools (Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Black Protestant), and oversampling for students of historically minoritized identities. After identifying patterns in the spirituality of deconstruction, including trends toward embodiment, attunement to the natural world, social activism, and syncretism, we examine how these students perceive the responses of their theological schools to students’ deconstructing spirituality. We especially note a pattern of ambivalence, where certain aspects of the institution (especially some individual faculty and administrators, and student affinity groups) support and model deconstruction for their students. We argue that the spirituality of deconstruction may, therefore, function to both challenge and regenerate institutionalized contexts of religion in an overall setting of institutional decline.

Keywords: American religion; spirituality; qualitative research



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1. Introduction

Although in popular discourse, “spirituality” often refers to subjective and individualized experiences, new scholarship on spirituality emphasizes its sociological character, showing how spirituality is ritually patterned to reflect cultural contexts and power relations (Steensland et al. 2022). Thus, while spirituality is often perceived as practices and feelings that depart from or challenge institutionalized religion, such practices and feelings can nonetheless become institutionalized within social settings, both formally religious and not.

In the United States, theological schools are important hubs of religious institutionalization designed to support and cultivate the spirituality of their students (Porter et al. 2019), and are currently undergoing dramatic changes in their vision and identity following population declines in formal religious affiliation and adherence (Aleshire 2021). For example, the population share of adherents to major Protestant denominations, with which many theological schools are connected, has shrunk by roughly half since the 1970s, and the number of Americans with no religious affiliation has increased from 6 to 20 percent in the same period (Pearce and Gilliland 2020). In such spaces, religious deconstruction can be both a defining project and an existential threat, as in the oft-heard maxim that “seminary is where religious people go to lose their faith”. In this paper, we apply an understanding of deconstruction as a kind of micropolitics (Marti and Ganiel 2014), through which people navigate the tensions between their religious institutional contexts and emerging interstitial contexts of spirituality (Ammerman 2022). We examine how deconstruction among

students in theological schools is associated with patterned shifts in spiritual practice; and secondly, we compare how theological schools across four major traditions (Main-line Protestant, Conservative Protestant, Catholic, and historically Black Protestant) are perceived as responding to the spirituality of deconstruction among their students.

Our study employs an innovative longitudinal dataset of in-depth interviews with theology students after their first year of their program and then two years later, in which we strategically sampled across the four major traditions and oversampled for historically minoritized students by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nativity, and theological orientation. These interviews took place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the political turmoil of the 2020 election, and several high-profile instances of anti-Black and anti-Asian violence, followed by massive protests across the country (Jankowski et al. 2023). These events have energized a collective reckoning in many Christian institutions about their role in political and social issues, alongside a measurable backlash against organized religion in public perception (Perry 2022; Braunstein 2022; Hout and Fischer 2002).

This study builds on a growing body of research into how people grapple with the polarization and backlash against organized religion and their own relationship to historically dominant Christian institutions, going beyond past accounts of disaffiliation trends and the growth of the “spiritual but not religious” (Ammerman 2013). Like other recent studies on the complexities of spirituality and/or non-religion as a mode of discourse (Frost 2019; Marti and Ganiel 2014; Bender 2010), our goal is to show how spirituality functions as a site of tension between people and their religious institutional contexts, especially during an era when powerful religious institutions are in recession (Chaves 1994). In this way, we also contribute to a “second wave” of spirituality studies (Steensland et al. 2022), dedicated to understanding spirituality as situated within contexts, practices, and power relations; and to the growing emphasis on how social power works in and through religious practice (Edwards 2019).

Our contribution to this research is to highlight the micropolitics of spiritual practice for those at the center of historically dominant churches—i.e., students pursuing a theological degree—and to show how theological schools respond by institutionalizing (or resisting) new forms of spiritual practice. We highlight patterns in deconstructing spirituality, which sometimes involve broadening the category of “spirituality” to include practices like physical exercise or social activism; and other times involve borrowing practices from other traditions, like ancestral veneration or Tai Chi. We then show how institutionally, deconstructing spirituality can be partially embraced and paired with practices of reconstruction, to emphasize the continued value of religious institutions in a changing context. We thus argue that deconstructing spirituality functions to both challenge and regenerate institutionalized religion, in part by drawing from interstitial spiritual forms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reframing Spirituality

Following the rise of research on spirituality since the 1990s, sociologists of religion have identified a “second wave” of spirituality studies (Steensland et al. 2022). The hallmarks of this second wave are a focus on spirituality as eminently social and attention to the contexts, practices, and power relations that shape spirituality in its varied formations. This reflects a shift in emphasis from the first wave of spirituality studies, which focused on the growing alienation from organized religion in the United States and Europe, and the trends toward adapting, combining, and re-creating spiritual practices to pursue more authentic and personalized expressions (Zinnbauer et al. 1997). First-wave studies documented the rise of new forms of spirituality that found fertile ground in post-industrial society and the counterculture of the 1960s (Wuthnow 1998; Bellah et al. 1985) and opened space for studying spirituality as a distinct phenomenon (Warner 2014).

However, within first-wave studies, the use of frameworks such as “seeking” vs. “belonging” (Wuthnow 1998), “spiritual but not religious” (Ammerman 2013), “personal mosaics” of spirituality (Pearce and Denton 2011), and “expressive individualism” (Bellah

et al. 1985) potentially fed into popular notions of spirituality as an anti-institutional and relatively autonomous project of individuals, standing in contrast to organized religion and systems of authority. It is this notion that the second wave seeks to correct, calling for closer attention to the specifics of context, practice, and power that shape spirituality as a sociological phenomenon (Steensland et al. 2022). Situating spirituality in this way helps counter sociologically questionable notions of unfettered authenticity and autonomy (Bender 2010; Meyer and Jepperson 2000). It also calls attention to the institutionalization of personal expression, including how certain expressions are held up as culturally normative or accepted, and how spiritual expressions thereby express and reenact social systems of power (Edwards 2019).

For example, Ammerman (2013) analyzes the discourses around “spiritual but not religious” people and concludes that it is a moral and political category rather than an empirical one, warning researchers not to take rhetoric as a guide to the understanding of either spirituality or religion. Meanwhile, the work of Tanya Luhrmann (2011) and others (Pagis 2019; Winchester and Guhin 2019; Tavory and Winchester 2012) reveals how certain forms of spirituality, such as Evangelical prayer, are taught and acquired as embodied habits, conferring social status on adept practitioners. In these examples, spirituality is not understood as a category of experience or expression standing in contrast to religion, but instead a modality of discourse and behavior through which social power is enacted, sought, and challenged, which can alternately operate within, adjacent to, or in tension with religious systems.

This approach aligns with recent revisions to the concept of secularization, including Chaves’ (1994) description of secularization as a decline in the authority enjoyed by historic Christian institutions over North American and European public life; and Swidler’s (2010) reframing of secularization as the “creation and destruction of forms of [sacred] collective power.” If what is rhetorically called secularization is in fact a process through which specific Christian and Anglo-European forms of collective power are being dismantled, then the concept of situated spirituality can provide leverage on the parallel question of how and where new forms of collective power are emerging and the complexities of their relationship to older institutionalized forms.

2.2. Spirituality and the Institutionalized Context of Theological Education

To better situate spirituality in relation to existing religious institutions, Ammerman (2022) proposes four ideal, typical contexts, defined by the dominant modes of regulation of religious action: entangled, established, institutionalized, and interstitial. The first refers to religion and spiritual practices so entangled in everyday affairs that it is difficult to think of them as distinct forms of social life. The second context is established, in which there is “both an organized entity that claims authority over religious practice and an organized state that legitimizes that authority” (Ammerman 2022, p. 39). The third context is institutionalized, which is characterized by compartmentalized modern societies, in which religious traditions also take organizational forms. Congregations, denominations, and other faith-based organizations in the U.S. are places where religious action and spiritual experiences occur. Each organization “has internal cultures and norms that shape practices, as well as internal resources and mechanisms for producing and reinventing ways of being religious” (Ammerman 2022, p. 41). Lastly, the interstitial macro-context is less institutionalized and fluid and takes place in individual life. Practices such as meditation, yoga, journaling, or lighting candles depend more on the individual’s creative imagination and the new technologies that make them accessible than they do on institutional authority.

The latter two types, institutional and interstitial, are particularly helpful for understanding spirituality within US theological schools. As institutions dedicated to spiritual formation and training leaders within the Christian tradition (Porter et al. 2021), such settings exert significant influence over which spiritual practices are made desirable, possible, and available. However, today, they also exist in a public context where the authority of historic Christian denominations in the U.S. has declined, along with overall rates of

affiliation and participation (Chaves 2017). In Ammerman's terms, the institutionalized context of spirituality—which theological schools were developed to support—is receding, which has produced a crisis of identity and challenged their sustainability (Aleshire 2021; Smith 2023).

While many smaller seminaries have closed or contracted in size, theological schools with a stronger base of resources have broadened their focus from training leaders for ministerial positions in Christian denominations to providing education for faith-informed leaders seeking to serve in other fields and roles. Many theological schools have also engaged in collective self-reflection on the eroding, institutionalized religious context and their role within it, as expressed in efforts to increase racial, gender, and theological diversity among their students and faculty, and—for a few liberal Protestant schools—taking public stances of LBGTQ+ inclusivity and support (Parker 2021; Jennings 2020).

This means several things for the regular practice of spirituality within theological schools. First, students who pursue theological education usually move between institutionalized and interstitial contexts of spirituality and often take a critical stance toward institutionalized expressions. Their spiritual practices are informed both by powerful discourses about what “counts” as spirituality coming from within their traditions and by countervailing discourses of deconstruction, which especially target aspects of institutionalized Christian spirituality, causing systemic harms against minoritized and vulnerable social groups. These students remain invested on some level in the institutionalized context of spirituality, by virtue of being enrolled in a theological school within a historic Christian tradition, but they are often just as invested in critiquing that context as preserving it.

Second, theological school leadership is broadly attuned to these tensions between institutionalized and interstitial contexts of spirituality, and they have reason to adapt to interstitial forms of spirituality to a degree, given that their survival depends on student enrollments. Of course, they are also constrained by their own denominational bodies and broader theological traditions, which makes certain forms of spirituality impossible for them to embrace. For example, while the practice of yoga was at one time the ne plus ultra of counter-cultural spirituality, today it would be difficult to find a theological school of any tradition that would not welcome, or at least allow, student-led sessions of yoga practice in official spaces (Roll 2021). On the other hand, queering spiritual language in songs or in poetry might be welcome in liberal Protestant theological schools but not in conservative Protestant ones, without major repercussions for the school and its internal and external constituencies.

Third, and following from the above, theological education is an important site for observing the enactment of power struggles over spirituality, and specifically the forms of spiritual practice that are made desirable, possible, and available. We can observe this process empirically by noting which types of spiritual practices remain institutionalized and thereby normative within religious organizations, while others remain interstitial. By the same token, we can observe such power dynamics at work when interstitial forms of spirituality (e.g., yoga, meditation) become newly institutionalized, through regular practice by students and sanctioning by school leadership.

To gain analytic leverage on this broad process, we focus our study on the spirituality associated with deconstruction within North American theological schools. While widely employed in popular discourse on secularization, especially the active ex-Evangelical movement (Onishi 2019), sociologists Marti and Ganiel (2014) describe the practice of “deconstruction” as a form of micropolitics, in which people respond to pressures for conformity by establishing competitive arenas (p. 26). These authors follow Goffman (1961, pp. 199–201) in their framing of micropolitics, as an expected consequence of institutionalized spirituality along with the necessary social condition of the individual “self” to exist. By engaging in micropolitics, individuals find ways to resist normative definitions that threaten to engulf them within their institutional commitments; or in Goffman's words, an individual “takes up a position somewhere between identification with an organization and opposition to it” (p. 201).

Discourses and narratives of deconstruction, therefore, provide an analytic entry point into such tensions, especially when they are observable among students undergoing theological education. As Goffman, Marti, and Ganiel show us, people engaging in the micropolitics of deconstruction are usually still active in their institutional commitments, which is why they may often seek out theological education rather than avoiding institutionalized religious sites completely. Yet such practitioners also experience an ongoing tension with institutional power, which can bubble over into direct conflict. Therefore, by analyzing discourses of deconstruction in connection to (changing) patterns of spiritual practice among theological students, we can better understand spirituality as a situated sociological phenomenon and how religious institutions are adapting to its embodied expressions.

2.3. Variations across Christian Traditions

As already suggested, these dynamics are likely to vary across the four major Christian traditions with significant infrastructure in theological education: mainline Protestant, Catholic, conservative Protestant, and historically Black Protestant. Mainline Protestant denominations created the dominant system of theological education in early American history, and their theological schools emerged from the modernist–fundamentalist controversy in the 1920s with a distinctive identity based on scholarly credibility, the critical study of the Bible, and the embracement of modernity. Mainline Protestant seminaries were also the first to experience notable declines in enrollments as early as the 1960s and to expand their reach beyond their partnering denominations (Aleshire 2021).

The first Catholic seminary in the U.S. was founded in 1791, but Catholic theological education never experienced the same institutional expansion as those connected to the Protestant denominations, due in no small part to anti-Catholic prejudice—both racial and religious—and the segregation of Catholics into ethnic neighborhoods with their own parishes and schools. Orders like Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, and Oblates founded their own seminaries, resulting in a diverse system of theological education that also includes academically rigorous theology programs within Catholic universities like Notre Dame and Boston College (Aleshire 2021, pp. 33–40).

Evangelical Protestant theological education is a more recent invention, which ended the 20th century on a distinctive upward trend but has more recently experienced the same contraction apparent in other traditions. Such schools pay special attention to the theological virtues that have characterized Evangelical Protestants, such as biblical studies, missions, and evangelism (Aleshire 2021, p. 44). While popular notions associate Evangelical Protestants with conservative Republican politics and megachurches, such characteristics do not necessarily dominate within Evangelical theological education (Ringenberg 2006). According to Aleshire (2021), Evangelical schools “are typically not intellectual apologists for popularized perspectives of evangelicals (but they) understand part of their mission to be reforming popular evangelicalism” (p. 35).

Finally, historically Black theological education was founded after the Civil War by formerly enslaved Black leaders. With financial assistance from Baptists of the North, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology was established in a facility that was used to prepare newly arrived Africans for sale as slaves. Another foundational milestone was the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church after formerly enslaved minister Richard Allen was expelled from St. George’s Methodist Church when he and other blacks approached the altar to pray (Aleshire 2021, p. 48; Lincoln and Mimaya 1990, pp. 50–51). Theologically, historically Black theological schools do not fit neatly into the liberal–conservative dichotomy; and though historically underfunded, they have been crucial sites for developing Black leadership, engagement in social activism, and challenging the dominant racial–religious order in the U.S. (Porter et al. 2021).

In sum, by comparing forms of spirituality associated with deconstruction among students in these four types of schools, we (1) seek insight into the micropolitics of living across institutionalized and interstitial contexts of spirituality; and (2) seek evidence of where and how forms of spirituality are being newly institutionalized, in the responses of

theological schools themselves to the micropolitics of their deconstructing students. On a theoretical level, we hope this will give us broader purchase on where secularization in the U.S. is going institutionally; not as a process through which a sphere of institutional life is dismantled, but as a process through which existing forms of collective power are challenged and new forms are being created.

3. Methods and Materials

The current study draws its data from the in-depth interview component of a mixed-method research study on spiritual formation and character development in North American theological schools.¹ The design of the larger study began with an online survey fielded in the fall of 2019 among all matriculating students at 18 theological schools across North America, with multiple follow-up surveys conducted over the following three years. The sample for 30 in-depth interviews was drawn from the pool of those who completed the first survey. Our sampling strategy for the interviews was to draw participants from four main traditions—mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and historically Black Protestant—and over-sample for students who identify with one or more dimensions of historical minoritization, including Black and African American students, Latine or Hispanic students, LGBTQIA+ students, and international students. We also sought to expand the theological diversity of the sample from each group, according to their responses on a question of being theologically liberal vs. conservative. Finally, we sought to limit the number of different theological schools represented, to compare diverse student experiences within the same schools where possible. This meant our sample is skewed toward larger programs within each tradition, where we had a large enough pool of student participants in the survey to capture some of the diversity we were looking for.

The overall sample from the first wave of interviews thus includes nine participants from a mainline Protestant theological school (including four international students, three Latine students, three Black students, and one LGBTQIA+ student)²; nine participants split between two Evangelical Protestant seminaries (including one international student, three Latine students, three Black students, and one LGBTQIA+ student); eight participants from a major Catholic university theology program and one from a smaller Catholic seminary (including one international student, one Latine student, and one LGBTQIA+ student); and three participants from a historically Black seminary.

All first-wave interviews were conducted between June and November of 2020 over Zoom, as an adaptation to COVID-19 travel and research restrictions. They covered topics related to religious history, religious and spiritual beliefs, spiritual practices, psychological well-being, and educational experiences, as well as their reflections on their first year of theological education. They were conducted by the first author and a graduate student assistant, and then transcribed via Zoom software version 5.0 and checked for accuracy by the first author.

Follow-up interviews were then conducted in 2022, again from April to December. We were able to conduct interviews with 22 from the original sample, of which six were from the mainline Protestant seminary; eight were from the Catholic schools; seven were from the Evangelical seminaries; and one was from the historically Black seminary. These interviews were more focused on current and evolving spiritual practices and beliefs, psychological well-being, and their spiritual formation experience over the entirety of their theological education experience. All follow-up interviews were conducted by the first author over Zoom, using Zoom software for transcribing and then checking for accuracy, as before.

For the current paper, the interviews were coded by the first and second authors using a focused coding framework, looking specifically at (1) mentions of religious change, struggle, or alienation from institutions; (2) corresponding discussions of spiritual practices and how they have changed over time; and (3) perceived support by and/or resistance from their theological school leadership in their own process of spiritual development.

4. Findings

4.1. Patterns of Deconstruction

Within our interviews, we gathered rich data on how U.S. theological students engage in deconstruction. We operationalized deconstruction as some combination of changes in their spiritual practices, religious identity, visions of the church, and how they conceive and relate with God, involving some tension with their institutionalized religious contexts. Some of the questions we asked to assess these processes were: (1) Would you describe your spiritual life as stable or in flux? Is this similar to, or different from, past stages of your spiritual life? (2) What role did religion and spirituality play in your life as a child and young adult? How has your relationship to religion and spirituality changed over time? (3) What are some of the private or solitary activities you engage in that you would consider spiritually or religiously significant? How did you come to adopt those activities? (4) What are some of the public or communal activities you engage in that you would consider spiritually or religiously significant? How did you become a participant in these group practices? And (5) How would you describe your relationship to God or ultimate reality? How has your view of God or ultimate reality changed over time? We also employed an open-ended interview strategy of probing for follow-up information on reports of change or tension in their religious life.

Not all our interviewees exhibited characteristics of deconstruction, but a majority did, especially among students at Evangelical and Mainline Protestant schools. Our Catholic group demonstrated less evidence of deconstruction; perhaps in part because four of the nine Catholic interviewees were following a path toward priesthood, and they expressed strong commitments to their Catholic identity and normative Catholic practices, such as attending mass, daily prayer, and participating in spiritual direction. Similarly, of the three students we interviewed from a historically Black seminary, only one demonstrated evidence of deconstructive processes. The others were thoughtful about the problems of institutional religion, but they did not narrate having undergone a process of major changes in their own religious identity, spiritual practices, or beliefs.

We also note that because we conceptualize deconstruction as a process, which was evidence in our interviews to varying degrees, we do not consider it appropriate to make claims of how many or which proportion of students are “deconstructing”. We also did not sample interviewees with representativeness in mind, but rather (as noted above) followed a strategic quota sampling design. Yet given the pervasiveness of evidence of spiritual deconstruction and change in our interviews, we would argue it is not unique to just a few constituents or demographics; while also noting that students fall along a continuum of how pervasive spiritual deconstruction appears to be in their accounts.

For those who did describe a spiritual deconstruction process, a common element among them was the salience of their life experience as the primary problematizing source. Students whose parents are religious leaders were especially drawn to deconstruct the expectations imposed on them as role models for the church. The few deconstructing Catholic students—both women, one white and one biracial—questioned their church affiliation because of how conflicted the sexual abuse cases made them feel. Many students from minoritized social groups, such as people with disabilities, as well as Latiné and African American students, moved from holding more conservative theologies and practices with a focus on prayer, Bible-reading, and personal devotion, toward adopting activism and justice practices as part of their faith commitments. Depending on the intensity of their questioning, this process could lead to disillusionment towards religious institutions (Jankowski et al. 2023) and potentially end in the dissolution of their Christian identity.

In terms of their shifting spiritual practices, these students tended to move away from more textual or discursive forms of practice like Bible-reading and prayer to adopt new practices of embodiment, or in other words, finding ways to be more grounded and intentionally present in their bodies. This trend reflects the common critique of Protestant theologies that diminish the body and an overly rationalized theological education. Prac-

tices such as running, yoga, gardening, silent meditation, or improvisation allow them to connect with what they conceive of as the divine and with their bodily selves.

Such was the case for an international student from Latin America at a Mainline school, who grew up in an Evangelical church but is no longer sure about his religious beliefs. When he entered theological school, his primary spiritual practices were reading Scripture, long periods of silent prayer, and fasting. Yet throughout his time in the program, he recounted, “the first spiritual practice to, like, be removed, was probably reading the Bible”, and “then silence became difficult and went away”. On the other hand, he began running frequently, gardening, and walking the labyrinths that his school’s Spiritual Life Office would occasionally set up in a room for an entire day.

Another example is a student at an Evangelical seminary, whose religious beliefs underwent a significant shift once she began to learn about cult survivors and narcissistic religious leaders outside the seminary. While rejecting what she considered manipulative uses of faith, she stopped attending church and tried to develop her spirituality in different ways: “I explore...like, travelling, or going for a walk...getting out and doing something different, like, is spiritual for me, or will [help me] reconnect.” She also started taking improv acting classes and considered this a spiritual practice. In our first interview with her, she regularly attended such improv sessions while attending church. She also described her new explorations of sexuality, hidden from both her family and the theological school leadership, which led her to identify as bisexual.

By the time of our second interview, she was no longer part of any Christian community, since she does not “really get anything out of it”, and she does not “agree with anything people say”. Although she still practiced some form of prayer, she said improvisation was what nourished her most spiritually by cultivating self-awareness, vulnerability, empathy, mindfulness, and playfulness. She was also deeply critical of Christianity for its role in justifying slavery and “manifest destiny”; and of the “evangelical isolation and indoctrination” of her upbringing as a homeschooled daughter of a pastor.

A related pattern within spiritualities of deconstruction is engagement with the natural world. For example, a Latina student in an Evangelical seminary grew up in a Spanish-speaking Evangelical church, but she became uncomfortable with the church’s avoidance of political issues facing the Latiné community. Her deconstruction process was also aided by an internship at a progressive Christian social justice activism organization in D.C. During our first interview, she explained that the Bible and the worship music she had once often listened to were no longer part of her regular repertoire of spiritual practices. She had started to adopt new practices of walking outside, especially along the beach, or “spending time watching the sunset,” which is “incredibly important” to her, to the point of calling it a “spiritual practice”.

Another example is that of a student from a historically Black seminary who, by the time of his second interview, had deconstructed many of his ideas about ministry to prioritize balance and self-care. When asked about the areas in which he has grown spiritually, he mentioned, “observation”: He has learned to “sit in nature and just observe all that God has created”, and to embrace stillness and quietness as spiritual practices outside church settings.

A third and somewhat different pattern within spiritualities of deconstruction is engagement in social activism. Among many of our interviewees, the move toward social activism reflects a desire to make their spirituality more practical vs. confessional. For example, one student at a Mainline Protestant school, who entered her M.Div. program reporting more conservative theological views, was already moving away from her Evangelical Baptist background at the time of our first interview. As a person with a chronic disability, she reckoned with how her embodied experience was often treated as a problem to be fixed by praying for God’s intervention, rather than something that could be collectively accepted or embraced. For this reason, she already felt uncomfortable in corporate worship settings and did not attend any churches in-person—a preference made somewhat more socially acceptable because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

By the time of our second interview, she was more secure in her avoidance of organized Christian worship settings and her disinclination to engage in normative Evangelical practices like Bible reading. She had also gotten heavily involved in disability activism, and she found a new sense of belonging within that community. One of her regular practices, which she described as spiritually significant, was the creation and use of a high-profile social media account to circulate information about disability and theology. Through that account, she creates awareness of church practices that are harmful to people with disabilities.

Another example was offered by a Black student in an Evangelical seminary. In our first interview, which took place in the summer of 2020, she described her initial experience with the seminary as somewhat mixed, but she was also a committed church attender and reported regular practices like Bible reading. Meanwhile, she had also become heavily involved in the Black Lives Matter chapter in her area and argued strongly in her interview that BLM activities were spiritually fueled—and were spiritually significant for her—but that the spiritual side of the movement was underrecognized because of the complicated relationship of BLM with historic Black churches over LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

By the time of her second interview, she had dropped out of the Evangelical theological school as a result of financial problems and a lack of support from the school, especially for finding suitable housing. She had also intensified her social activism, within and apart from the Black church she attended, and she had major criticisms of the Evangelical seminary over its complicity in racialized injustice, especially against Black women (again, more on this in the next section). Importantly, her activism was also connected to adopting aspects of Africana spirituality, including having an altar in her home for the practice of Voodoo and being “really into ancestral research”. In her own words, “I’m very syncretic now. I do different rituals, you know, that are that are based in Voodoo, but I also say prayers, you know, when I read the text, and I meditate on Scripture”.

This quote reflects a fourth and final pattern within spiritualities of deconstruction, engaging in syncretism. While noting the complex and often harmful historical usage of the idea of syncretism, we use this label to intentionally indicate how deconstructing students often embrace the idea of blending Christianity with traditions they were taught to avoid, as in the quote by the Black woman above. Certainly, in earlier research, yoga and New Age practices reflected this tendency to adopt from different spiritual traditions (Kucinkas 2019), and we continue to see this move in our data, with practices such as ancestral veneration, Tai Chi, and tarot card reading, and practices like labyrinth-walking and meditation, which have a multi-faith heritage.

A good example of this trend was the interest in Buddhism expressed by another Evangelical seminary student who “really no longer has any intention” of rooting herself in “any church setting. She believes that “exposure” to Buddhism and other religious traditions beyond Christianity can be “really formative” and “fruitful” for someone like her. Thus, while the first three patterns we noted—embodiment, engagement with the natural world, and social activism—involve a kind of broadening of the category of “spiritual practice” to include activities mostly outside of any institutionalized religious practice, this fourth pattern involves borrowing from institutionalized traditions other than Christianity.

4.2. Institutional Responses

As already suggested above, many students engaged in deconstructing spirituality experience a sense of tension with or alienation from, organized religion in general, and their theological program in particular. These experiences show distinct variations across types of theological schools and the traditions in which they are rooted. Students at the historically Black seminary expressed generally positive feelings about their institutions’ responses to student questioning and deconstruction. For one female student, the seminary was where she first encountered critical African American writers like W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katie Geneva Cannon, who changed how she saw God and her theology and enhanced her ability to connect Christian teaching and

Black consciousness. She noted how one professor advised her to “trust the journey,” as a nod to the inevitability of questioning and change through theological education and the value of what was on the other side.

Experiences with institutional responses among Mainline and Evangelical Protestant schools were much more mixed, however. Among Mainline students, of which a majority illustrated at least some signs of deconstruction, the most common experience seemed to be ambivalence. In other words, they felt supported by some aspects of the program but not others. Often, their positive experiences involved a few key faculty and administrators whom they experienced as modeling a kind of spirituality they could relate to. One biracial woman at a Mainline seminary, who had a Pentecostal background, told us how her regular spiritual practices shifted away from reading the Bible daily, to sitting in meditative silence, to walking the labyrinth. She recounted feeling guilt initially about her neglect of Pentecostal-style prayer and Bible reading, but she was also able to embrace the labyrinth-walking practice more fully because the school’s Spiritual Life Office made it available regularly throughout the semester.

In her own words, “One of my deans told me, when I first came into the program, ‘you will leave knowing only one thing to be true about God, and that’s different for all of us.’ Everything else will build on top of that”. In this quote, a key administrator within the school seems to prepare her for the deconstruction of much of what she “knows” to be “true about God”. Reflecting on her overall experience in her second interview, she said, “It was healing, not because of the seminary itself, but because of the people. So, because of some of the teachers that I took courses with, because of the students that I took courses with, that I became acquainted with, because of the people we read in class. . .not because of the school that I went to”.

Here, this student talks about the experience as “healing” of her past negative experiences with organized religion, but she attributes this positive experience to some of the teachers and students, not the school overall. This echoes the sentiment of the white Mainline Protestant student, who is now a disability activist, on her experience within the same school: “I felt safe [in seminary] but I don’t know if I’ve always felt supported. . .the Dean, they’re saying yes to one thing yesterday, another thing every single day, that has no rhyme or reason. . .I feel like the school promises a lot, but then doesn’t follow through and I’ve just seen that time and time again.” In the broader context of our interview, she described the “promises” of the school as having to do with key aspects of inclusion, especially recognition for those with disabilities. She then followed up, “I would say, like faculty have been great, you know, so I feel very supported by some of the faculty for sure.”

There were also some Mainline Protestant students whose sense of the institution was more positive, and a couple of others who felt much more alienated from it. For the international student from Latin America introduced above, his deconstruction process found quite a bit of guidance and support from specific avenues within the program, especially faculty who modeled a critical and liberation-focused stance toward religious institutions, and fellow students within international student and Latiné affinity groups. By our second interview, this student was no longer certain of his Christian identity and had decided against further study in theology, but this shift had been aided and reaffirmed by certain faculty and fellow students, rather than meeting complete resistance. Therefore, he felt less alienated from the theological school itself than from organized Christianity (especially Evangelicalism) more generally.

Yet another student, who left Pentecostal Christianity over the course of the program and now participates in a synagogue along with his Jewish partner, described the school as “patting itself on the back” for being progressive but never actually addressing the varieties of racism and anti-Semitism expressed in the core theological school curriculum, such as the “white-washed” version of Christianity within the required church history course. He very much described the school as resistant to diverse forms of spirituality, especially those rooted in Jewish traditions, which he discovered as he himself adopted more Jewish practice.

As compared to these ambivalent experiences, the students in Evangelical schools tended to have either very positive or very negative views on their institution's response. These students tend to fall in two categories: those who were not much engaged in deconstructing, and thus viewed their seminary experience very positively, and those who were engaged in deconstructing and were very frustrated with the institution's resistance to change. The latter experience was demonstrated in two cases from the last section, the white LGBTQIA+ woman who became involved in improv and the Black woman who adopted aspects of Voodoo practice.

The former was finishing her last few classes of the program online when we talked to her the second time and recounted in detail how she regularly brought up challenges to the white Evangelical viewpoint she learned in class, but her questions or criticisms were never deeply engaged. She noted feeling very different from her professors and peers as someone who wasn't really concerned with "holding onto my faith." She then criticized the school overall for advertising their interest in things like "multiculturalism and diversity and art," but "then but then you go to take classes, and like pretty much every single professor's a white guy. . . and there's barely any women faculty, barely any women administrators." She was also very concerned about the misuse of faith to manipulate, as in the case of an article she mentioned, in which a pastor said, "that racial justice, was like diametrically opposed to the Christian gospel." Such points of view made her feel alienated in her school. While she recognized that "there is definitely people out there who feel the same way that I do about Christianity," she could not expect to find them at the seminary.

Similarly, the Black woman student criticized the school for claiming to embrace diversity but not doing so in practice. She said of her time in the seminary, "Yeah, it was an extremely stressful time. . . so, their spiritual formation is not for me. Their spiritual formation does not include a Black American woman who is unmarried, who comes from, not an affluent background. . . They have a PR Campaign of erasure. Everything is performative. Instead of doing the real work at the institutional level, to shift the spiritual harm that they're causing." In saying "their spiritual formation is not for me," she suggested that the types of spirituality made accessible and normative in this environment are not relevant to her experiences or needs. Something as simple as "discipleship" groups focused on maintaining strict sexual faithfulness and/or purity felt irrelevant to her lifestyle, let alone the absence of support for her interest in Africana spiritual practices and ancestral research.

One final student in an Evangelical seminary, a white male of Jewish heritage who converted to Christianity in college and now identifies as a Jew who also accepts Christian teachings about Jesus, was more prosaic about his experience. He noted to us, at our second interview, "I came to realize. . . the pedagogical program is probably oriented, not towards someone like me." He notes that for a while, this produced a negative experience: "So, I guess it made me more, like, distrustful." He followed by saying, though, that he could now see some of the positive support he got out of it: "every professor I met has had a deep concern and care for student's spiritual lives." He also found one other institutional resource that aided him through deconstruction: "a resource that actually ended up being of the utmost spiritual care for me was their School of Psychology, because they give therapy sessions, and that was a really important space for me to dive deeper into the workings, and, like the ambiguities and uncertainties of my spiritual life at the time."

His depiction of the Evangelical seminary is thus more tempered, and more akin to the reflections of many of the Mainline students, especially in how it paints specific faculty and staff within the seminary more positively. Indeed, one of the things we found in almost all cases, no matter the institutional context, was the importance of one-on-one relationships with faculty and/or peer affinity groups for making elements of deconstruction accessible and desirable. Even those students with very negative assessments of their theological education experiences could often name a professor, an administrator, or a group of peers where they were able to find affirmation for deconstructing spirituality, and models of how to engage in it within the overarching context of the institution. Examples above include the Dean who told one student, "you will leave here knowing only one thing about God";

another student's "Science and Religion" discussion group; another student's professor of Liberation Theology; another student's school-sponsored therapist; and yet another Catholic student's spiritual director. Thus, for almost all students, the spiritual practices of deconstruction were, in part, made accessible and desirable to them by structures within the institution.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our interviews show that, whether intentional or unintentional, theological education is a key site of deconstruction, expressed as changes in spiritual practices and shifts in views on God and organized religion, which create some degree of tension with one's institutionalized religious context. For most of the people we interviewed here, the institutionalized religious context is U.S. Christianity in four main variants (Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, and Catholic). In contrast to traditional understandings of theological schools as sites where devotees are trained to serve the goals of religious institutions (Aleshire 2021), we find theological schools to be sites of struggle over spirituality and over which forms of spirituality ought to be made accessible, desirable, and normative. Theological students often engage in a kind of micropolitics, a la Goffman (1961), where they "take up a position somewhere between identification with an organization and opposition to it" (p. 201).

We also observed several patterns in the spirituality of deconstruction, which included the adoption of spiritual practices that are more embodied, focused on the natural world, social activism-oriented, and syncretic. The first three patterns seem to reflect a broadening of the category of "spirituality" to include non-institutionalized practices such as jogging, walking on the beach, taking acting classes, or social media-based organizing. The last of these reflects an adoption of practices institutionalized within non-Christian traditions or that bridge traditions, such as labyrinth-walking, ancestral research, and Voodoo ritual.

As we sought to interpret these patterns, we came to see them as "moderately transgressive," in that they push the boundaries of what U.S. Christian institutions tend to hold up as normative, but they do not usually equate to a complete rejection or replacement of normative Christian practice. For example, a Black woman who engages in Voodoo ritual also reads the Bible and prays regularly. The many students who walk the labyrinth are stepping outside of their U.S. Evangelical prescriptions but are still relying on traditions within Christianity and are even affirmed by the Mainline institution's labyrinth pop-up as a regular part of community life. The activist student who organizes for disability rights online may have shifted away from church-going to other forms of gathering, but she still utilizes the theologies of disability made accessible to her in seminary. The Latino and Latina students who have left Pentecostalism have adopted a liberationist approach to spirituality, drawing from figures and writings within the Christian Marxist tradition, which they again encountered through theological education.

This quality of being moderately transgressive fits well with Goffman's description of micropolitics, which, again, is a position that combines opposition to and identification with an institution. Perhaps on this level, "deconstruction" as descriptive language is misleading, since it connotes a process of taking apart, rejecting, or departure from one's relationship to organized religion. In our findings, the spirituality of deconstruction is tension-ridden precisely because it happens through engagement with religious institutions, and in the context of a continued commitment to religious life, however tenuous. Even those students who no longer claim a Christian identity, like the LGBTQIA+ woman from the Evangelical seminary, continue to critically confront religious life rather than disengage completely. Her critiques of white Evangelicalism, expressed in her second interview, covered several pages of transcript, suggesting she still has a level of investment and concern with seeing those systems change. She said that her current ambition is to obtain a doctoral degree in theology or religious studies to better understand the roots of Christian failure.

Although all our data on theological schools themselves is secondhand, meaning we did not interview theological school faculty or administrators directly on their approaches

to their students' spiritual deconstruction, we did see evidence in the experiences of students that the spirituality of deconstruction is modeled and made accessible by some aspects of these institutions themselves. As noted in the literature review, it makes sense that theological schools would adapt somewhat to the micropolitical challenges of their students, especially given pervasive threats to their organizational viability. We saw this adaptiveness most obviously in Mainline Protestant theological schools, perhaps because such schools have been grappling with such existential threats the longest. By contrast, Catholic and Black Protestant schools have never had the high level of institutional power historically enjoyed by Mainline Protestantism, and so have not experienced as steep a relative decline. Evangelical Protestantism, on the other hand, "peaked" much more recently, and only now are its seminaries seeing notable declines in enrollments. Many Evangelical seminary leaders may be resistant to adapt to spiritualities of deconstruction, therefore, for both structural and theological reasons.

Of course, the nature of Goffman's micropolitics is that it is a micro-sociological, interactive, and situated phenomenon, perhaps best observed through ethnographic data collection than retrospective interviews. Interview accounts are indirect empirical tools because they are several steps removed from the enactment of micropolitics in situ, and what people say they do in their classrooms and extracurricular spaces could easily be quite different from what they actually do (Jerolmack and Kahn 2014). This is especially true when we consider the tensions inherent within micropolitics and spirituality, where how one "feels about" or "perceives" their experiences with theological education may change from day to day as they move between the stances of opposition and identification. We should be careful, therefore, not to assume we have perfectly captured the everyday dynamics of deconstruction and spirituality in any of the schools where our interviewees have attended, no matter which tradition of Christianity they are rooted in.

This raises a related point on positionality, however, which is that all three authors of the current student are embedded within theological education (two as faculty, one as a student). Our interpretations of our interviews are thus informed by our daily experience and interactions in spaces very similar to those occupied by our interviewees. Although there is potential for our "insider" status to introduce a kind of bias in favor of these institutions, whether by shaping interviewee responses or our own analytic process, we would also argue that, given the nature of our subject matter, being situated within these institutionalized contexts ourselves helps us better understand the background to our interviewees' accounts, and it especially provides an awareness of which spiritual practices are indeed becoming institutionalized in those spaces.

This experience also makes us confident in our assessment that many people undergoing theological education creatively engage in spirituality and exhibit shared patterns of change in their spirituality as part of a struggle to "heal" from, "transform," or "critique" the institutionalized contexts of U.S. Christianity. Moreover, their struggles are not just abstract but are made concrete in their habits, as they describe them. The struggle happens through avoiding in-person Sunday church gatherings, being "unable" to read the Bible, and/or "losing the ability" to pray as they had once been taught. It happens through imbuing new practices with spiritual significance, seeking to share them with sympathetic others, and hoping—if not calling—for them to be recognized by their institutional leaders. Finally, this struggle does seem to push visible change, in which spiritual practices are made accessible, desirable, and normative, and it seems at times to draw theology school leaders and students together as much as it separates them. In other words, some leaders within theological education seem to be supportive of the spiritualities of deconstruction that their students engage in because they also participate in these micropolitics.

We argue, therefore, that the spirituality of deconstruction may ultimately help regenerate institutionalized religion in the United States, even as it challenges religion's historically dominant forms. In line with Swidler's (2010) description of secularization as the destruction of centers of sacred collective power, of which the flip side is always the creation of new forms, the spirituality of deconstruction seems often to be paired with as-

pects of *reconstruction* in diverse new directions, with an ambiguous and underdetermined relationship to the category of “Christian.” Thus, we do not claim that the spirituality of deconstruction ultimately serves the preservation of Christian institutions *per se*. Rather, we argue that it is through deconstructing spirituality and the micropolitics of those most actively engaged in it, that new centers of sacred collective power are being created, which will result in new, not-yet-identifiable institutionalized forms of spirituality.

This is also quite different from how spirituality has often been thought of in the past in relation to institutionalized religion. Our argument rejects the idea that spirituality is extra-institutional or a product of an individuals’ personal journeys of questioning and discovery. The spirituality of deconstruction certainly carries motifs of questioning and discovery, but it is always situated within institutional systems of power and the types of practice that are made accessible and desirable by those systems. Put more simply, people who are “deconstructing” are doing so collectively, in patterned ways, and through avenues delimited by institutional power, even as their deconstructing practice aims to transgress and transform that power in key aspects.

The limitations of our study point to promising future directions of research. Firstly, our data speaks much more clearly to the experience of students within white-dominant religious spaces than within the Black church or immigrant religious institutions, given the relatively small number of historically Black seminary students we enrolled. By the same token, several of the most vivid accounts of deconstruction were from Black and Brown women, and they overlapped with an experience of racialized alienation from their predominantly white institutions. We have shared a few of these accounts, but our study only scratches the surfaces of the complex links between racialization and micropolitics in U.S. religion, enough to suggest that much, much more work needs to be done in this area. As a more generative finding, our study also suggests that the micropolitics of Black Christians may involve a reclaiming or renewal of African indigenous spiritual practices.

Secondly, we have not heard directly from theological school leadership in the current study, which makes it difficult to parse out the dynamics of power within these institutions with more nuance. Institutional power is not monolithic but is variably exercised in relations between administrators, faculty, and students; professors of various ranks; and between a theological school’s leadership and its affiliate church organizations and accrediting bodies. The dynamics in each of these relationships are likely to matter greatly to which forms of spirituality are institutionalized and how a given school or seminary responds to the spiritual innovations of its students. As noted by one interviewee about how “the Dean, they’re saying yes to one thing yesterday, another thing every other day, that has no rhyme or reason,” responses can even be disorganized, partial, and fragmented, making student experiences unpredictable. Future research is needed to identify where different forms of power in fact reside in such institutions and how they are expressed, with an eye towards this unpredictability.

In the meantime, our study contributes to the literature on the study of spirituality, as situated within contexts, practices, and power relations (Steensland et al. 2022) and the specific dynamics of institutionalized contexts of spirituality (Ammerman 2022), especially in the current era when such contexts are facing major threats to their sustainability. It does this by showing that even the seemingly individualized process of “deconstruction” demonstrates distinct patterns and relations with institutionalized spiritual forms. It is relevant for sites toward the center of U.S. institutionalized contexts—i.e., schools of theological education—and across four major traditions of Mainline Protestantism, Evangelical Protestantism, Catholicism, and Black Protestantism (though in our data, deconstruction was most visible in the first two groups). Ultimately, we argue that the spirituality of deconstruction both challenges and regenerates such institutionalized religious contexts, in part by broadening definitions of what counts as “spiritual practice” and by adopting the practices of other institutionalized traditions.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.seminaryformationproject.com> (accessed 29 January 2024).

² Some students fit with more than one of these categories, so the numbers add up to more than the total.

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