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WHAT MOTIVATES AUTHORS TO INCLUDE RELIGIOUS IDENTITY
IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS?

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
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by

Kenneth J. Eiker

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Kenneth J. Eiker

Michael Sampson

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ABSTRACT

WHAT MOTIVATES AUTHORS TO INCLUDE RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS?

Kenneth J. Eiker

This dissertation explores children's authors' experiences of and motivations for including religious and spiritual themes in their picture books. It investigates the intricate connection between authors' backgrounds, including their cultural, spiritual, or religious, and familial roots, and how these elements permeate their writing. The study examines these authors' lived experiences and personal narratives, uncovering how their unique identities shape the portrayal of complex spiritual or religious themes in children's literature.

Across the interviews, several themes were identified, including family teachings, religious upbringing, and personal spirituality. Authors draw from a wealth of personal experiences, such as Matt de la Peña's Christian themes in *Last Stop on Market Street*, Amy Hest's Jewish storytelling inspired by her childhood, Gita Varadarajan's Hindu influences in *My Bindi*, Simran Jeet Singh's Sikh heritage, and Reem Faruqi's Muslim cultural expressions. Gene Weingarten's atheistic perspective offers a secular viewpoint, adding to the diversity of beliefs in picture books.

The results reveal why authors are motivated to employ spirituality and religion to create inclusivity in their work and represent the broader scope of human experience in children's literature. Interviews underline the role that narratives play in fostering

empathy and understanding among young readers, providing mirrors to see themselves and windows to view others. The books' detailed illustrations are highlighted as crucial in enhancing cultural and religious representation.

Aligned with the Department of Education's guidelines on religious tolerance in schools, the research addresses authorial intent and significance. Furthermore, it builds on John Dewey's theory of experience and Bakhtin's theory of novelness, showing how the everyday lives and "voices that have not been heard" can resonate powerfully through the medium of children's picture books. Study limitations are acknowledged, and future research and advocacy recommendations are made.

In conclusion, this dissertation champions the need for diverse, authentic representation in children's literature, encouraging publishers and educators to support books that nurture empathy and develop a comprehensive understanding of religious and spiritual perspectives. It emphasizes the significance of illustrations in enriching these narratives and appeals for an inclusive approach to children's literature in public education that is reflective of our multicultural and multifaceted society.

DEDICATION

For their examples of faith: Alice Wyman Scott, Bessie Hagerty Eiker, Kenneth E. Eiker, Reverend Barbara Kelley, and Rose Runk.

For her pastoral guidance: Lyn Werner.

For their encouragement, care, and patience: Steve Runk, Joan Aaron Eiker, Katherine Eiker Currie, Jennifer Larsen, Kara Lenorovitz, Jenny Eiker-Runk, Caroline Kaufman, Michael Sampson, and Bonnie Johnson.

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In writing this dissertation, I navigated the confluence of history, personal identity, faith, and the pursuit of a more equitable world. This process has been a poignant exploration of the complexities of my heritage, beliefs, and aspirations.

I wish to acknowledge my great-great-great-great-great grandmother, Mary Hayes Gloster, an Episcopal widow whose steadfast faith and conviction led to the construction of Immanuel Church in LaGrange, Tennessee, in 1840. Her story carries the essence of American folklore and reminds us of the power of faith and the determination of a 19th-century woman.

Beyond her story, I grapple with a profound sense of contrition, recognizing that nine family-owned enslaved people built the culmination of Mary Hayes Gloster's endeavor brick-by-brick. My ancestors owned human beings; I apologize. This hushed chapter in my family's history is no longer a secret. The book is open. My generation knows better and will do better.

I will never adequately atone for my ancestors' racism. May this work be revelatory and inspire others to share their voices and stories.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

This study examined the lived experience of children's authors who include religious and spiritual themes in their picture books. Specifically, it explored the personal experiences that motivated authors to write picture books and why the authors chose to write about religion or spirituality. It further investigated the use of picture book illustrations to visually represent the theme of religious and spiritual identity. This qualitative study contributes to the extant research literature given that there does not appear to be a single study on religious and spiritual identity from the personal perspectives of children's authors. It further demonstrates how authors crafted the representation of religion and spirituality as essential parts of communicating religious and spiritual identity. Moreover, it critically examined how the authentic expression of religious and spiritual themes was based on the author's [rather than an outsider's] background experiences and intentions (Sanders et al., 2010). The depiction of spiritual and religious identity in children's literature is pivotal because spirituality and religion are important aspects of diversity and inclusion.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Beginning with the 2021–2022 school year, every school district in the state of New Jersey was required to highlight and promote diversity, including economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and belonging in connection with gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance in the curricula of students in kindergarten through grade 12 (Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey, 2021). This initiative became part of the district's implementation of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards. According to the Pew Research Center (Lupu,

2019), the Supreme Court has consistently distinguished "instruction *about* religion," which is both constitutionally acceptable and educationally appropriate, from "religious practices," such as worship or reading the Bible in school, which are theoretically aimed at promoting religious attitudes and values. In other words, no single religion should be proselytized. However, several justices of the Supreme Court have shown support for teaching "the Bible as literature" in public schools, discussing the impact of religion and religious institutions throughout history, and even providing courses on comparative religion (Lupu, 2019). In addition, spirituality and religion may be important aspects of individuals' culture, identity, and experience (Learning for Justice, 2023). As such, it is crucial to consider these as aspects of diversity and inclusion in educational and learning settings.

When children cannot find a reflection of themselves in the books they read, or when the images they see are twisted, harmful, or humorous, they receive profound lessons about how they are valued or devalued in the larger societal culture. Consequently, our classrooms must be spaces in which children from all cultures and backgrounds can discover their reflections. Children from socially dominant groups often find reflections of themselves in books, but they, too, have suffered from a shortage of books about other groups (Bishop, 1990). Students require the book to be a window into reality, not merely on fictitious terms. They need books that help them comprehend the multicultural nature of the world in which they live, their position as a single group member, and their relationships with other humans. In the United States, where racism remains one of the most significant unresolved societal problems, children's picture books may be one of the few resources where socially isolated and sheltered children can

encounter individuals different from themselves (Bishop, 1990). If children from majority cultures or identities only see reflections of themselves, then they will develop an inflated feeling of their significance and value in the world, which is a hazardous form of ethnocentrism (Bishop, 1990).

A quantitative study by Bickford and Lawson (2020) examined children's books challenged or banned by parent groups, school boards, and school administrators in the United States. Public libraries and public schools frequently face challenges to suppress or remove specific books, which results in banning books. The study found that authors of color are disproportionately targeted in challenges that examine challenges to books with multicultural themes and characters. In addition, books featuring themes of racial and religious diversity are frequently challenged or banned. Non-Christian and non-European cultures were also targeted by the groups mentioned above. All but one of the religiously-themed challenges in the study above featured non-Christian religions. Although not explicitly Christian, the 1992 book, *Draw Me A Star* by Eric Carle was banned because Carle's creation story was considered overly Biblical, and it included a stylized illustration of a nude man and woman. Books focusing on European traditions or Christianity encountered no obstacles or restrictions; indeed, challengers seem committed to policing literature at odds with the social norms of acceptable identification and white, Christian standards. Racial and religious diversity comprised 8% of all challenges (Bickford & Lawson, 2020).

Ellen Handler Spitz's landmark book, *Inside Picture Books* (1999), focused on the interaction between a child and an adult reader. Spitz emphasized picture books' significance and recommended that adults interpret and select future picture books to

share with children. In addition, Spitz acknowledged that exploring the specifics of picture book authors and artists would have been an enjoyable supplementary endeavor, yet she only briefly addressed their motivations and contexts (Spitz, 1999). In addition to eliciting joy and laughter, picture books may provoke fear and dread. Due to their immaturity, young readers may require the assistance of an older reader, such as a parent or teacher. By serving as an editor and improviser, an adult may clarify language, point out graphical elements, build on themes, and establish connections between the child's and adult's life, and the stories and images. In addition, parents may assist children in appreciating more context, rhetoric, and similes (Spitz, 1999).

The importance of adult reading guides is underscored by outcomes among children without access to such guides. Indeed, when reading books, children lose an essential developmental stage when left to their own devices. They frequently encounter motivational challenges in learning to read and, in many circumstances, fail to acquire a profound appreciation for literature. However, every time an important adult or another child helps a small child feel the rise and fall of narrative tension and the effects of color and pictorial representation, their pleasure and sense of mastery increases toward induction into the world of art and culture (Spitz, 1999). When children have access to books in which their cultural and/or other identities are represented, it may also provide the child with an opportunity to bond with the adult guide. In addition, when books depict other or unfamiliar cultures and traditions, the adult guide may serve as an important guide to approaching and learning about new cultures.

The illustrations and contents of picture books reflect and challenge prevalent cultural assumptions and preconceptions. The essential adult reader acts as an

indispensable guide to navigate the complexities inherent in the books, the ambiguities in the meanings of particular pictures and texts, and their relationships with one another. By sharing books with children, adults contribute to the cultural transfer from one generation to the next (Spitz, 1999). To paraphrase Rudine Sims Bishop's seminal 1990 essay, *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors*, sometimes books are windows, revealing glimpses of real or imagined, familiar or unfamiliar worlds. These books are also sliding glass doors; readers need only pass through them in their imagination to enter whatever world the author has built or recreated. However, a book can also serve as a mirror. Literature transforms and reflects the human experience back to us, allowing us to see our lives and experiences as part of the more extraordinary human experience. Therefore, reading becomes a method of self-affirmation, and readers frequently seek reflections of themselves in books (Bishop, 1990).

In their book, *Picture Books, Pedagogy, and Philosophy*, researchers Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss (2012) explained how they discovered that many adult teachers and teacher educators feared discussing controversial issues with children and avoided open-ended dialogue about works of children's literature that deal with taboo topics. Haynes and Murriss further acknowledged that an atmosphere of fear is responsible for instructors' apprehension to teach with picture books that address sensitive subjects. However, they contended that it is essential to confront complex topics in teaching. Educators must respond constructively to controversies to deepen knowledge and comprehension by expanding children's freedom of thought and investigation of ideas. This technique promotes inquiry, critical thinking, and open discussion in the classroom (Haynes & Murriss, 2012).

Federal and local regulations are relevant to incorporating religion and spirituality in public school settings. The Supreme Court has deemed instruction about religion as appropriate (i.e., distinct from evangelical teaching), and states such as New Jersey have mandated education in religious tolerance at all grade levels. The United States Department of Education (2020) provides guidance on Constitutionally protected prayer and religious expression in public elementary and secondary schools on its website, which offers comprehensive guidance on prayer in U.S. public schools. It explains that while public schools must remain neutral about religion, students are free to engage in individual or group prayer on their own as long as it does not disturb the school environment. In other words, schools are prohibited from sponsoring or leading prayer activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

The information also provides clear guidelines for incorporating religion into the curriculum. Specifically, public schools can teach about religion as part of a secular curriculum as long as it is presented objectively and academically. Schools may also provide learners with opportunities to study religious texts; observe religious holidays; and learn how religion has affected the history, culture, art, and literature of the United States and the world. However, these activities must be presented unbiasedly, and the school cannot promote or endorse any particular religion (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The online guidance also addresses the issue of student-led prayers during school events, such as graduation ceremonies or sporting events. It states that students are free to express their religious beliefs but cannot be required or compelled to participate in any prayer or religious activity.

In addition, any such activities must be entirely student-led and cannot be endorsed or promoted by the school or its officials (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Overall, the guidance is designed to ensure that public schools respect their students' religious beliefs and freedoms while simultaneously remaining neutral on the issue of religion. By providing clear guidelines for incorporating religion into the curriculum and respecting the rights of individual students, the Department of Education has sought to strike a balance between promoting religious tolerance and preventing the establishment of any particular religion in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

The American Academy of Religion (2010) stated that religious illiteracy frequently contributes to prejudice and hostility, obstructing efforts to promote respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence, and collaborative initiatives. Although it may not be the primary cause of violence, it is nonetheless frequently a contributing factor in creating an environment where bigotry and the distortion of religious beliefs are not challenged, leading to violence and marginalization. The United Nations and several European initiatives have expressed concerns about this issue. Antisemitism, the association of Islam with terrorism, conflicts between different branches of the same religion, and the dismissal of religion as irrational or oppressive are examples of the negative consequences of religious illiteracy. Improving religious literacy, meanwhile, can foster better understanding among people of different faiths and enhance civic education, preparing students for democratic participation in a multi-religious nation (American Academy of Religion and the School Taskforce, 2010).

The essential nature of this study is demonstrated by the fact it provides mirrors, windows, and doors into the motivation of children's book authors who write about

religious and spiritual identity. Seeing picture books created by authors and illustrators from diverse backgrounds helps children explore different career paths. Books can be more than just reflections of the world; they can also serve as maps to help children navigate their place within it (Koss, 2015). Literature can open up new possibilities for children as they search for ways to find their paths. It is important that children see people like themselves creating picture books, and if diverse authors and illustrators are not represented, it sends a negative message. It is not necessary that they see themselves in what they read but also that they see diverse authors and illustrators to understand that everyone is valued in the publishing world and that opportunities in publishing are open to all, regardless of race, gender, or ability (Koss, 2015). Although Koss (2015) made this critical point about race, gender, or ability, she excluded religion in her argument for openness to all. However, the author's religious or spiritual background knowledge offers readers a more profound understanding and connections to the text.

In addition, contemporary literary theory and current research on children's literary response has concentrated little on what authors intend to communicate to their readers. Barthes (1977) went so far as to write about the "death of the author," asserting that readers can interpret literary texts as they see fit because so little is known about the author's purpose. Hirsch (1967) distinguished between a literary text's significance and meaning when addressing the complex question of what authors intend. Hirsch (1967) argued that a text may have multiple meanings for different readers at different times and locations but only one meaning: the author's intended meaning (Sipe, 1999). While they might concur with Sipe's (1999) distinction, most literary critics would be less optimistic than Hirsch (1967) about the possibility of determining the author's intent. Meaning

resides not in the author's intentions (nor the text itself) but in readers' literary experience and social interactions (Sipe, 1999). However, children are curious about what authors (and illustrators) intend. Sipe's research on picture storybook read-alouds for first- and second-graders (Sipe, 1996, 1997) revealed that numerous questions were asked regarding authors and illustrators, such as "I wonder why the author chose to end the story in this manner" and "I wonder why the illustrator chose to use this color on the endpages" (p. 121). Both students and instructors proposed these questions, which were beneficial for literary comprehension (Sipe, 1999).

The current study's relevance is further underscored by other researchers who also identified teaching techniques that included recognizing the author's perspective. For example, the "questioning the author" method developed by Beck et al. (1997) for use with both fiction and nonfiction encourages teachers and students to read "as if the author were present to question" by asking questions such as "So, what is the author trying to tell us?" or "Why is the author telling us that?" (p. 50). The teacher can encourage students to pose similar reflective questions by serving as an example, thereby fostering a robust discussion. There is a need for further inquiry into how children can be taught not to settle for superficial interpretations of literary texts and to dig deeper (Sipe, 1999).

The concept of an author's possible authority has been reconsidered from the perspective of diverse literature. The question of who may validly, accurately, and authoritatively write about non-mainstream cultures is debated among children's multicultural literature experts. Does an author need to be a "culture aficionado" to write about a particular culture? What constitutes intimate knowledge, and can it be acquired by outsiders? Are there perspectives that outsiders to a culture can contribute that are

valuable? Who is authorized to represent a different culture? (Sipe, 1999). For example, some Pueblo readers were critical of McDermott's *Arrow to the Sun* (1974) because they argued that McDermott, who is not of Pueblo descent, misrepresented Pueblo culture in numerous ways in this award-winning novel (Smolkin & Suina, 1997). It is fascinating to compare the reaction of children to texts written by insiders and outsiders to their culture (Sipe, 1999).

Sutherland (1985) asserted that authors take one of three distinct positions toward societal norms and ideologies: the politics of assent, the politics of advocacy, or the politics of attack. The politics of assent merely reflects and reasserts societal norms, rendering ideologies invisible, whereas the politics of advocacy and assault either advocate for or criticize specific sociocultural practices (Sipe, 1999). Although Sipe (1999) discussed societal norms and ideologies, they failed to acknowledge or discuss practices related to religion and spirituality. This absence was notable given that spirituality or religion may be central aspects of cultural identities and practices. Understanding spirituality/religion can provide greater insight and understanding of written works. For example, insights into Maurice Sendak's lived experiences would have provided a greater depth of understanding for his readers. In a 2012 *NPR* interview (Silverman, 2012), Sendak revealed that he was not happy as a child. He was born in Brooklyn, New York, to Polish Jewish immigrants the year before the Great Depression. Even though he grew up in the United States, the horrible events of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe were always on his mind. As a result of his Holocaust-related fears and familial experiences, Sendak was frequently sick and bed-ridden. He was always afraid of dying and ruminated over the deaths of his relatives in the Holocaust. The context of

Sendak's Jewish identity and period as a young Jewish man added nuance to his written works. However, Sipe's (1999) approach may have failed to consider this aspect of his identity and experience.

For instance, *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (Sendak, 1993), a surreal fantasy about homeless children who live in a garbage landfill, appears to reflect the author's use of attack politics, in this case against the specific social practices that cause people to be homeless. For the book to have the most significant impact on children, it appears essential they comprehend the author's position. How children's responses to books vary based on these three authorial stances is therefore worthy of further research and consideration (Sipe, 1999).

Research Questions

This study explored the following research questions:

RQ1: *What are the human experiences of those who are writing and illustrating children's picture books that include themes of religious and spiritual identity in the twenty-first century?*

RQ2: *Why did the authors choose to write about religion or spirituality?*

Definition of Terms

Child: According to Marie Louse Friquegnon (1997; Haynes & Murriss, 2012), a child is defined in two ways. The first model characterizes the child as an incompetent adult whose childlike needs must be extinguished. The child is instructed to follow, obey, and imitate the adult without question. This viewpoint disregards playfulness, trust, zeal, and openness. The alternative definition of a child emphasizes children's innocence and the necessity of fostering their development. Without adult intervention, the child, according

to Friquegnon, has significant freedom. Friquegnon contends that both viewpoints are insufficient. The terms child and childhood are value-laden and culturally variable and can only be defined in part. Cultures dispute which characteristics and potential should be highlighted (Haynes & Murriss, 2012).

Children's Picture Books: Picture books help children learn about their world and impart cultural messages and beliefs about society. Children's self-awareness may be influenced by the books they read and engage with, particularly those used in schools and other educational settings (Chaudhri & Teale, 2013; Koss, 2015), and these books can also assist children in the formation of a positive sense of self-identity (Hall, 2008; Koss, 2015; Levin, 2007). Children can also benefit from challenging preconceptions and having their cultural perspectives broadened by reading books (Koss, 2015; Thein et al., 2007). Because the vast majority of children have some experience with them and picture books are instructional instruments, the subject matter inside them is critical (Koss, 2015).

Cultural Identity: Cultural identity refers to the identification with or sense of belonging to a specific group based on various cultural factors, such as nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion. Cultural identity is established and maintained through exchanging communal information such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms, and conventions. Cultural identity is multifaceted because individuals often belong to more than one cultural group. In the past, researchers assumed that identification with cultural groups was evident and fixed. However, cultural identity is considered contextual and subject to temporal and spatial shifts. Through communicative behaviors, cultural identity

is continuously enacted, negotiated, preserved, and challenged in a globalized society with growing intercultural contacts (Chen, 2014).

Culture: The concept of "culture" is ever-evolving, and the word itself can be interpreted in various ways. It is possible to conceive of objective culture as a human construct.

Visible cultural artifacts are those that have an objective existence. Some examples of such artifacts are clothes, labor tools, residential buildings, and works of art. Institutions such as marriage systems; laws (including inheritance systems, taboos, etc.); political organizations; and religions are examples of invisible components that constitute objective culture (Pepitone & Triandis, 1987).

Diversity: Diversity manifests our many individual and communal identities and distinctions (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, tribe, caste, socioeconomic status, thinking and communication styles). We actively seek out and interact with other opinions because we believe we can only advance justice by recognizing and valuing our differences and affirming our commonalities (Ford Foundation, 2022).

Equity: Equity is the fair treatment of, provision of equal opportunities to, and equitable access to information resources for everyone. Equity can only be achieved in an environment of dignity and respect (Ford Foundation, 2022).

Inclusion: Inclusion fosters a culture of belonging by actively encouraging the participation and contribution of all individuals. Every individual's voice contributes value, and communities should strive to create a balance despite power inequalities. However, no single individual can or should be asked to speak for a community as a whole (Ford Foundation, 2022).

Religion: The world's religious systems represent humanity's aspirations to comprehend and relate to reality. Religion is, therefore, more than belief in a deity or supernatural realm; it is more than the existence of sacred texts and worship sites. Whether these ideas pertain to supernatural beings or interpersonal behavior, religion involves an organized belief system and prescribes specific behaviors for its followers, such as ceremonies of worship, individual pious deeds, or certain sorts of collective conduct. Religion provides a system of understanding the greatest mysteries of human existence: the nature of the cosmos, why we suffer, and what comes after death (Boyett, 2016). In addition, religion is a cultural and social phenomenon deeply intertwined with human political, social, and cultural life. It influences and is influenced by the historical and societal contexts from which it arises. It is essential to distinguish between the personal beliefs and practices of religious devotion and the academic study of religion from a secular perspective. Here, secular refers to an approach to teaching unbiased religion, neither favoring nor rejecting any specific religious tradition or expression (American Academy of Religion and the Schools Task Force, 2010).

Religious Identity: Religious identity provides insight into an individual's religious self and may yield even more significant insights into cultural movements. It may further constitute the core of an individual's religiosity. Once an attachment or commitment has been established, religious identity appears more significant than religious beliefs or practices. Individuals may stop attending religious services, stop reading sacred texts, and even cease believing in the core doctrines of their religious tradition. Nevertheless, their religious identity remains with them throughout their lifetime (Bell, 2008).

Religious Illiteracy: Religious illiteracy refers to a deficiency in comprehension regarding the fundamental principles of various religious traditions and expressions that are not explicitly categorized by tradition. It also pertains to a lack of awareness of the diversity of beliefs and expressions within different traditions, in addition to the significant influence that religion has had historically and continues to have today in human social, cultural, and political contexts (American Academy of Religion and the Schools Task Force, 2010).

Religious Literacy: Religious literacy involves recognizing and scrutinizing the interconnections between religion and social, political, and cultural aspects of life. A person with religious literacy will have a fundamental comprehension of the history, fundamental texts (if applicable), beliefs, practices, and current forms of various religious traditions and expressions as they emerge from particular social, historical, and cultural contexts, and they will continue to influence and be influenced by them. In addition, they will be able to recognize and investigate the religious aspects of political, social, and cultural expressions across different periods and regions (American Academy of Religion and the Schools Task Force, 2010).

Spirituality: Spirituality is an inner connection to a loving and guiding higher force. This higher power may be called God, High Power, nature, spirit, the universe, the creator, or other terms that connote a divine presence. The crucial element is that spirituality comprises our relationship and communication with this higher presence (Miller, 2015).

Spiritual Identity: Spirituality is a profoundly felt sense of who a person is spiritually and how individuals maneuver, see signposts, and engage with the world from a spiritual perspective (Miller, 2015).

Worldview: Worldview is a phrase frequently used across disciplines but one that is usually ill-defined or vague. All metaphors provide obstacles, yet merging many interpretations can provide clarity and a practical working meaning. A worldview is a set of coordinates or a frame of reference within which our different experiences may be positioned. It is a symbolic system of representation that enables us to combine what we know about the world and ourselves into a global picture, illuminating reality as it is given to us inside a particular culture (Aerts et al., 2007, Flanagan, 2020).

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

This study, and its exploration of the lived experience of authors who depict religious and spiritual identity in children's picture books, was informed by John Dewey's theory of experience (Dewey, 1938; Kim, 2016). Specifically, Dewey defined experience as the interactions between a person and their environment. According to Dewey (Kim, 2016), experience can be described using various terms, including dynamic, united, communicative, historically significant, and socially oriented. In addition, experience is always subject to change because there is always a brand-new and unique interaction between a person and the environment. However, all experiences are connected, and individual interactions between the person and the environment may build over time. No single experience is isolated from one another because they are unique and unrelated to any other experience. Indeed, experiences are linked via Dewey's concept of togetherness (Kim, 2016). It is therefore difficult to definitively differentiate between one experience and another experience. The social and cultural aspects of experience exacerbate this difficulty. The social and cultural component of experience serves as the foundation for each individual's unique circumstances. The root of experience is the connection between a person and the surrounding environment. In addition, communication is always a direct consequence of the engagement process (Acampado, 2019). Of the several principles in Dewey's overarching theory, one is that experiences build on one another in a continuum (Kim, 2016). To emphasize this, Dewey quoted Tennyson's poem, *Ulysses*, "Yet all experience is an arch" (Kim, 2016). As such, this study was informed by Dewey's theory, given that authors' experiences motivated their writing choices.

Bakhtin's theory of novelness also informed the current study (Kim, 2016).

Throughout his career, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) produced numerous global models and frameworks in the field of literary theory that communicated the following messages:

- avoid forcing a predetermined plot conceived as the only one that could work;
- focus on the significance of the everyday, the typical person, and the ordinary;
- respect a dialogic truth that emerges from voices that have not been heard; and
- recognize the value of indeterminacy as a cornerstone of human liberty, openness, and creative potential.

The central term of Bakhtin's theory (i.e., novelness) may be easily misunderstood. It is important to note that the meaning of the term "novelness" is connected to the literary genre of the novel. Bakhtin distinguished between "novels" and "novelness," the former referring to actual examples of the literary genre that we recognize as the novel, and the latter referring to significant characteristics that all stories share but are not confined to books. In addition, his theory highlights the significance of transparency (Kim, 2016). The work of the Russian novelist Dostoevsky, whom Bakhtin employed as a model for his view of novelness, exemplified how novelness, according to Bakhtin's description, enables ideas to develop and evolve. For example, according to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky allowed his work to surpass certain limitations and let the genuine link begin where the usual storyline ends in his stories (Kim, 2016). Kim commented that this is how researchers should conduct a narrative inquiry. Specifically, Kim encouraged

the researcher to ensure the open-endedness of storytelling that connects a participant or reader and one story to another (Kim, 2016).

Review of Related Literature

Children's picture books are a distinct and specific subset of children's literature. Specifically, picture books are books designed for children that have images on nearly every page. Graphics play a crucial part in illustrating the message. Approximately 50% of the story is conveyed through the artwork. There are even picture books without words, known as wordless picture books. Often, picture books are the first books that children encounter. The books are either designed to be read aloud to children or independently by children with the support of an adult (Mahendran, 2011).

Mahendran (2011) conducted an informal study using a convenience sample of 20 English-speaking kindergarten children in Serdang, Selangor, India. Several elements engage children in picture books. Mahendran's research question was, "What do children really look forward to in a picture book?" His survey questions focused more on why children select books than what they look forward to in reading or listening to picture books. His results showed that kindergarten children in India are most attracted to brightly colored books, illustrations, and book titles. Anecdotal comments from teachers revealed that the children surveyed disliked stories with moral values because they felt they were constantly being taught about morals at school and home.

Children's picture books are essential for a myriad of reasons. Humans are innate storytellers (Coles, 1990), and we express our human thoughts through increasing modalities, primarily various forms of print. Children's picture books serve as relatable mirrors to identity, development, and belongingness in the classroom. Religion and

spirituality have been dominant aspects of cultural identity throughout history and today. When violence is fueled by intolerance, representing religious and spiritual identity in children's books can plant seeds of diversity, empathy, equity, and inclusion (National Crime Prevention Council, 1999). Research has indicated that children enjoy discussing their religious and spiritual lives (Coles, 1990). It is problematic when children do not see their authentic selves and religious and spiritual identities mirrored in the books they read. Children must also learn about other spiritual and cultural identities to create diverse, inclusive, and equitable classroom environments (Spitz, 1999).

Clinical psychology research has also demonstrated that even talking and learning about religious and spiritual identity may be essential to healthy development (Miller, 2015). However, spiritual and religious identity has rarely been depicted in non-proselytizing children's books. Consequently, it is vital to understand the experience of children's authors who choose to represent spiritual and religious identity in their books and to understand the motivation(s) behind that decision. Thus, qualitative work with children's authors who depict spiritual and religious identity is necessary to expand the literature to include aspects of diversity and culture (i.e., spiritual and religious identity) in children's books.

Some authors choose to incorporate religious and spiritual identity into their picture books. These authors were and are potential sources for exploring their authentic motivations for writing about spiritual and religious identity with criticality. An examination of these authors' perspectives and experience helps to fill a gap in the literature and enables a broader audience to learn more about authors' motivations. In addition, these authors may serve as role models and inspirations for underrepresented

groups of children who may choose to incorporate aspects of their identity, such as religion or spirituality, into their art or work.

A critical analysis of the experiences of authors who depicted religious and spiritual identity in children's books and why they included such themes is missing from the research literature in education or psychology. Although many articles describe how religion is depicted and taught in children's picture books, there is a dearth of research regarding authors' perspectives. Indeed, to the author's knowledge, only one children's author has written a piece from an author's viewpoint; in it, she answered the question, "Why do you write for children?" As such, there is a clear need for research that examines the lived experience of authors of children's books. As with any text, the work must be considered critically to determine the authors' purpose, motivation, and trustworthiness. This is why studying author motivation is consequential in accurately depicting spirituality, religion, and culture in children's literature.

Morgan and Forest (2016) recognized the crucial role that children's literature has historically served in keeping marginalized people oppressed along religious, gender, and racial lines. For example, in Nazi Germany, children's books portrayed Jews as poisonous, evil thieves and compared Jews to animals (Morgan & Forest, 2016). The books exemplified Nazi propaganda to influence young children and propagate antisemitic rhetoric. Although this example highlights the potential role of children's books in promoting marginalization and the discrimination of religious minorities, children's books may also be utilized to promote understanding and acceptance. As such, it is essential to examine the lived experience of children's authors who depicted religious

themes in their work. This example may be extreme; however, it is an example of criticality and the importance of examining an author's identity.

Illustrations and their design impact how individuals view and understand religious themes and identity in children's books. This was demonstrated in the article, *Depictions of Religion in Children's Books* by Wicks, Freeburg, and Goldsmith (2013). Specifically, the authors explored how children are introduced to religion and spirituality in children's books. They specifically identified how themes of the church, spirituality, religion, death, God, and creation were represented in children's literature, and identified illustrations as playing an essential role in the conveyance of meaning. The primary purpose of an illustration, they noted, is to clarify language and shed light on the written text. Indeed, the term "illustration" derives from the Latin verb "illuminare," which means "to light up" or "to illuminate." It is used to describe illustrations in medieval literature. Illustrators achieve this purpose through their skills, sense of style, and use of color. The term "illustrative technique" refers to an artist working with a particular medium or set of media to produce a piece of art. Children's books may appear straightforward, but creating illustrations that convey complicated situations to young readers can be challenging. Each book exhibits the signature style of its respective author. The characteristics of the artist's style that we can identify as continuous, repeating, or logical in a picture book are essential to maintaining the coherence and consistency of the text and graphics (Wicks et al., 2013).

There is a gap in the literature on the lived experiences and religious or spiritual identity in children's picture books. Secular publishers have been found to print books about religious holidays. Wicks et al. (2013) cited a study by Sekeres (2008) in which she

identified themes in children's books tied to specific religions. For example, she noted that Jewish children's books focused on themes of responsibility and community, Christian children's books concentrated on themes related to dependence on God and honoring God, and Muslim children's books focused on obeying parents and the Qu'ran. The authors delved deeply into the topic of illustrations and the human response to color, identifying the comforting feeling of color in books about heaven, angels, Jesus, and God. The authors noted that they could not answer questions about the differences between secular and religious publishers' choices to publish books with religious themes. Although the study offers an interesting analysis of the depiction of religion in children's books; it did not explore the how or why from the author's experiential viewpoint (Wicks et al., 2013).

Spencer (2014) explored themes of Buddhism and spirituality in works by renowned authors Shel Silverstein and Edward Gorey, describing Zen Buddhism in described in great detail in addition to comparisons of religion and spirituality and comparing books by both Silverstein and Gorey to Buddhist tenets. However, Spencer was speculative in his contrasts, and the paper did not include Silverstein's or Gorey's religious experience. Silverstein died in 1999, and Gorey died in 2000—more than a decade before Spencer wrote his essay. Without author interviews, the experiences that led to the authors' motivations to include religious identity in their children's picture books could not be revealed (Spencer, 2014).

Although the experience of children's authors is understudied and underexamined, a few notable instances have expanded our understanding of their experience regarding the depiction of religion. For example, Newbery Award winner Katherine Paterson

addressed the question, "Why do you write for children?" in her narrative essay. Paterson writes fiction for young adults. In her article, she explained that writing was a calling, and expressed the belief that writing for children should be honest. She commented how some of her readers objected to her writing and thought it was too difficult for her young readers to understand, further arguing that it is nonetheless imperative to address questions such as, "Who am I? Where did I come from, and where am I going? What are human beings that God should be mindful of them? Who is my neighbor? My brother? My sister? My parent? Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the righteous suffer? How can the wounded be healed? Why is there death in the world?" (p. 571). Her autobiographical narrative was provocative, but she failed to address why she incorporated themes of religious identity in her fiction (Paterson, 2000). Although this article provided some insight, qualitative research, rather than essay writing, remains necessary to examine the lived experience of children's authors regarding the depiction of religion.

Relationship Between Prior Research and Present Study

The existing research is rich with studies about religion and children's books; however, the question of what motivates authors to write about religious and spiritual identity is missing; indeed, this topic is absent in the field of literacy research. This study will begin to benefit scholars as questions of cultural identity and equity continue to be explored. As noted previously, religious identity is part of cultural identity. This study merely begins to fill the void in research that examines the implications of researching authors' experiences and their decisions to include themes of religious identity in children.

CHAPTER 3 METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Research Question

This study explored the following research questions:

RQ1: *What are the human experiences of those who are writing and illustrating children's picture books that include themes of religious and spiritual identity in the twenty-first century?*

RQ2: *Why did the authors choose to write about religion or spirituality?*

Research Design and Data Analysis

This qualitative study used narrative inquiry to answer the guiding research questions. Prior to beginning the study, the researcher received IRB approval from his institution, St. John's University (Study Approval Number: RB-FY2023-348).

All study activities were conducted in accordance with the ethical and research standards of St. John's University's IRB. The narrative inquiry method of the current study explored the lived experience of individuals, and the researcher synthesized and made meaning of these stories through content review, coding, and thematic categorization. This method of inquiry was appropriate for studying multiple individuals, connecting themes across interviews, identifying similarities, and revealing potentially unexpected themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As explained earlier, the narrative inquiry method was ideal for understanding lived experience as according to John Dewey's theory of experience (Kim, 2016) and Bakhtin's theory of novelness (Kim, 2016). The process involved conducting interviews, discussing books, and sharing family stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The narrative inquiry methodology was most appropriate for the current study for multiple reasons. First, this method of inquiry allowed the researcher to contribute to the research literature by answering questions such as:

- Did the author intend to include religious or spiritual identity in their book, or did it evolve into the story?
- What was the individual author's religious experience?
- How did the author's religious community perceive and receive the book?
- What spiritual or religious doubts and questions of faith have they had?
- How did the author feel about the way the illustrator supported the story?
- Did the illustrator include specific nuances the author wanted to see in the book?
- Does the author feel pressure to be a representative of their faith community?
- What did the author hope their reader would take away from the book?
- Does the author believe their book has a universal theme?
- Was proselytizing a consideration the author had while crafting the book?
- Was there anything that the author would want to change about the book?
- How did the author consider the potential perceptions of the child and adult readers?
- What personal vulnerabilities did the author draw upon as they developed their characters?
- Do readers contact the author? What do they say?
- Did the author receive any pushback about the book?

The study included interviews with six children's authors, five of whom practiced different world religions and one atheist. Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

After receiving the transcripts of the interviews, the lead researcher re-read and listened to the discussions between three and five times. While reading, the researcher took notes and considered potential categorical themes, similarities, and differences across interviews. Strategies for organizing and analyzing the data were based on Johnny Saldana's book, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, Fourth Edition (2021), and seminal work conducted by Creswell and Creswell (2018). The researcher used paper, pencil, and markers to facilitate content analysis and delineate categorical themes. The data were manually categorized by themes and authors. The researcher examined and interpreted the collective data, the picture books serving as artifacts.

Validation was performed by sharing the researcher's re-storying with the individual authors to ensure that each participant was represented accurately. All participants confirmed the accuracy of the information and expressed their enthusiasm for the researcher's work.

Sample Books and Participants

Six children's picture book authors were interviewed for the study. The authors wrote children's picture books that included religious or spiritual beliefs, or non-beliefs, as a relevant aspect but not necessarily the primary theme of their books. The researcher carefully chose non-proselytizing books that represented appropriate read-alouds for an elementary public-school classroom. To identify and recruit potentially eligible participants, the researcher identified contemporary picture books with specific religious

or spiritual themes by entering search terms such as *Muslim picture books* on Amazon and other book sites and search engines. Then, as a further examination of criticality and legitimacy, the researcher reviewed the list and determined if any books had won awards or were recognized as exemplars by religious organizations, educators, or parents. The researcher read every book considered and used their professional judgment to select those that would serve as mirrors, windows, and doors. Finally, the authors were contacted and invited to participate. It should be noted that every author accepted their invitation with no hesitation and provided informed consent via written approval or signature. Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom.

The following six books and children's authors were recruited for participation in the study through author websites or networking connections:

- *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña, Christianity
- *Lailah's Lunchbox: A Ramadan Story* by Reem Faruqi, Islam
- *The Friday Nights of Nana* by Amy Hest, Judaism
- *Fauja Singh Keeps Going: The True Story of the Oldest Person Ever to Run a Marathon* by Simran Jeet Singh, Sikhism
- *My Bindi* by Gita Varadarajan, Hinduism
- *Me & Dog* by Gene Weingarten, Atheism

Instruments

Demographic and Background Questionnaire

During interviews, participants were given the opportunity to provide demographic information, including gender, race or ethnicity, religious or spiritual tradition, number of books published, and length of time identifying as an author.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

All participants were asked the following interview questions. The researcher sometimes asked follow-up questions to obtain information and allow authors to provide their personal experience, even if this was beyond the bounds of the questions asked.

- Did the author intend to include religious or spiritual identity in their book, or did it evolve into the story?
- What was the individual author's religious experience?
- How did the author's religious community perceive and receive the book?
- What spiritual or religious doubts and questions of faith have they had?
- How did the author feel about the way the illustrator supported the story?
- Did the illustrator include specific nuances the author wanted to see in the book?
- Does the author feel pressure to be a representative of their faith community?
- What did the author hope their reader would take away from the book?
- Does the author believe their book has a universal theme?
- Was proselytizing a consideration the author had while crafting the book?
- Was there anything that the author would want to change about the book?
- How did the author consider the potential perceptions of the child and adult readers?
- What personal vulnerabilities did the author draw upon as they developed their characters?
- Do readers contact the author? What do they say?

- Did the author receive any pushback about the book?

Procedures

In accordance with IRB policies, a Consent to Participate in the Study form was given to each author to obtain informed consent before participation in the study. Due to the nature of the study and because the authors are public figures, the consent form specified that the participants would not be anonymous. All participants signed the consent forms except for Gene Weingarten, who provided written consent for the study via email. Permission for this procedure was obtained by the researcher's mentor and Dean of the university. Following the informed consent process, the lead researcher scheduled and conducted interviews.

The interview questions above formed the protocol. The researcher quickly developed a rapport with all of the participants. Open-ended questions were asked to obtain additional information. The researcher served as an active participant in the interview process. Although an interview protocol was created, the narrative inquiry method provided the researcher with the flexibility to allow the interviewees to expand on their responses via prompts and validation of their lived experiences. Expanding on answers to interview questions was encouraged. Reflexivity was addressed in the introduction to the study; here, the lead researcher explained their educational background, religious, and cultural experience, and why the study holds meaningful implications (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, the researcher employed an active listening technique and paraphrased the authors' comments during the interview. Reiteration ensured a clear understanding of the authors; it was also a form of validation and rapport building throughout interviews.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

I interviewed six authors about their children's picture books that include themes of religion or spirituality. The interviews lasted between 47 and 84 minutes via Zoom, phone, and in person. All interviews occurred between June 6, 2023, and August 13, 2023.

- Matt de la Peña (pronouns: he/him), Christian-themed picture book, *Last Stop on Market Street*. de la Peña is a New York Times bestselling and Newbery Medal-winning author of seven young adult novels, including *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *We Were Here*, and *Superman: Dawnbreaker*, in addition to five picture books, including *Last Stop on Market Street* and *Love*. de la Peña earned an MFA in creative writing from San Diego State University and a BA from the University of the Pacific, where he went on a full basketball scholarship. de la Peña received an honorary doctorate from the University of the Pacific in 2019. He resides with his family in Brooklyn, NY. He teaches creative writing and visits schools, colleges, and universities nationwide (<https://de.la.Peñadelapena.com/>). A synopsis of *Last Stop on Market Street* is found on de la Peña's website: *CJ and his grandma ride the bus across town every Sunday after church. But today, CJ wonders why they don't own a car like his friend Colby. Why doesn't he have an iPod like the boys on the bus? How come they always have to get off in the dirty part of town? Each question is met with an encouraging answer from Grandma, who helps him see the beauty—and fun—in their routine and the world around them. This energetic ride through a bustling city highlights the wonderful perspective only a grandparent and grandchild can share. It comes to life through*

Matt de la Pena's vibrant text and Christian Robinson's radiant illustrations
(<https://de la Peñadelapena.com/>).

Last Stop on Market Street has received numerous awards and accolades,
including, but not limited to:

- Winner of the Newbery Medal
 - Caldecott Honor Book
 - Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Book
 - A #1 New York Times Bestseller
 - *A New York Times Book Review* Notable Children's Book
 - An NPR Best Book
 - *A Horn Book* Best Book
 - *A Boston Globe* Best Book
 - A Chicago Public Library Best Book
 - A Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature "Best Multicultural Books" Pick
 - Chosen for *School Library Journal's* Top 10 Latin Books List (<https://de la Peñadelapena.com/>).
-
- Reem Faruqi (pronouns: she/her), Muslim-themed picture book, *Lailah's Lunchbox: A Ramadan Story*. Faruqi's favorite part of teaching second grade was the "Read Aloud" time. Now, her favorite pastime at home is reading with her daughters. Reem, of Pakistani origin, moved to Peachtree City, Georgia, from Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, when she was 13 years old. She is also the author of her three middle-grade novels in verse, *Unsettled*, *Golden Girl*, *Call Me Adnan*, the chapter book *Anisa's*

International Day, and picture books *Amira's Picture Day*, *I Can Help*, *Milloo's Mind*, and *Swimming Toward a Dream*, many of which have received starred reviews. Faruqi enjoys doodling, writing, and taking photographs. She lives in Atlanta with her husband and four daughters (<https://reemfaruqi.com>).

A synopsis of *Lailah's Lunchbox* from the *School Library Journal* appears on Faruqi's website:

Lailah recently moved from Abu Dhabi to Peachtree City, GA, and while she misses her friends back in the Middle East, she is very excited to be old enough to fast during Ramadan. However, being new is one thing, but being different is another. What if her class doesn't know what Ramadan is? What if she is the only one fasting? Lailah falters when it is time to give Mrs. Penworth a note asking that she be excused from lunch, and she has to endure the tempting smells of food and kind offers of her classmates to share lunch. After escaping to the foodless library, the school librarian encourages Lailah to write down her feelings and share them with her teacher. After all, who knows what could come of sharing her culture? The large, often full-page watercolor illustrations provide gentle details that add depth to the text (<https://reemfaruqi.com>).

Lailah's Lunchbox has been banned in Florida and has received numerous awards and accolades, including, but not limited to:

- Daybreak Children's Picture Book Award, Recognizing Muslim Women's Contributions to Literature

- Notable Social Studies Trade Book For Young People, a cooperative Project of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and the Children's Book Council
- Featured Book of the Month, Anti-Defamation League
- American Library Association Notable Book for Children
- Skipping Stones Honor (<https://reemfaruqi.com>).
- International Literacy Association Choices Reading List

- Amy Hest (pronouns: she/her), Jewish-themed picture book, *The Friday Nights of Nana*. Hest wanted to be a writer from a young age; however, she explained:

I never thought my life was exciting enough for a writer. I did not have any fantastic adventures. I did not run away from home. My parents and I actually got along. I was such a goody two shoes that I couldn't help but wonder if any other kid would want to read anything I wrote

(<https://www.candlewick.com/authill.asp?b=Author&m=bio&id=3706&pix=y>).

Hest was born in New York City and raised on Long Island. She started working as a page in a library when she was sixteen years old. Hest began her career as a children's librarian in the New York Public Library system in the early 1970s, followed by years of experience in children's book publishing. Throughout this time, she wrote without sharing her ambition with anyone, including her publishing coworkers! Hest is the author of over 45 books for young readers, most of which include family and intergenerational themes. Her books include *Mr. George Baker*, *Guess Who*, *Baby Duck!*, *In the Rain With Baby Duck*, *Kiss Good Night*, *Do You Feel Well, Sam?*, *I Love You, Soldier*, *The Private Notebook of Katie Roberts*, *Age 11*, *The*

Great Green Notebook of Katie Roberts, Age 12, Remembering Mrs. Rossi, When Jessie Came Across the Sea, and The Summer We Found the Baby

(<https://www.amyhest.com>).

The following is a synopsis of *The Friday Nights of Nana* as written by the researcher: Jennie, a young girl, spends the day with her Nana, engaging in activities such as preparing the house, shopping, cooking, and welcoming family members. While not overtly religious, these activities are part of the traditional Shabbat preparation. The story highlights moments such as Nana lighting candles and whispering Sabbath prayers, indicating the presence of Jewish rituals. However, the specific details of the prayers or the symbolism of the candles are not the main focus, and the emphasis is instead on relationships and familial and cultural aspects, with religious traditions in the background. Jewish traditions form a quiet theme throughout the story, contributing to its rich cultural tapestry and enhancing the narrative's depiction of family, practice, and togetherness.

Hest has received numerous awards and accolades including, but not limited to:

- Christopher Award, three times
 - Boston Globe/Horn Book Award
 - Sydney Taylor Honor Book Award, two times
 - Parents' Choice Gold Award
 - ALA Notable Book for Children, two times
-
- Simran Jeet Singh, Ph.D. (pronouns: he/him), Sikh-themed picture book, *Fauja Singh Keeps Going*. Singh is the Executive Director of the Aspen Institute's Religion &

Society Program and author of the national bestseller *The Light We Give: How Sikh Wisdom Can Transform Your Life*. He is an Atlantic Fellow for Racial Equity at Columbia University and the Nelson Mandela Foundation and a Soros Equality Fellow at the Open Society Foundation. In 2020, *TIME Magazine* named him one of sixteen activists fighting for a more equal America. Sing holds graduate degrees from Harvard University and Columbia University, and he writes frequently for major publications such as *Harvard Business Review*, *TIME Magazine*, and *Religion News Service* (<https://simranjeetsingh.org>).

A Synopsis of *Fauja Singh Keeps Going: The True Story of the Oldest Person To Ever Run a Marathon* is found on Singh's website:

This is a non-fiction story of Fauja Singh, who broke world records to become the first 100-year-old to complete a marathon. Fauja Singh Keeps Going is the first children's book from a major publisher to feature a Sikh story.

Fauja Singh was born determined. He was also born with legs that would not allow him to play cricket with his friends or transport him to school miles away from his village in Punjab, but that did not deter him. Working on his family's farm helped Fauja grow stronger and realize his full potential. He never stopped striving. Fauja decided to run his first marathon at the age of 81 after dedicating his life to strengthening his body, mind, and heart. He set world records and became the first person over the age of 100 to finish a marathon (<https://simranjeetsingh.org>).

Fauja Singh Keeps Going: The True Story of the Oldest Person To Ever Run a

Marathon has received numerous awards and accolades including, but not limited to:

- An NPR Best Book
 - A New York Public Library Best Book
 - A Chicago Public Library Best Informational Book for Younger Readers
 - Texas Topaz Nonfiction Reading List pick
 - A University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education Best Book for Young Readers
 - A Rhode Island Children’s Book Award Nominee
 - A VA READS Picture Book Winner
 - International Literacy Association Notable Book for a Global Society
- Gita Varadarajan (pronouns: she/her), Hindu-themed picture book, *My Bindhi*.
Varadarajan was born in Kerala, India, but relocated to Chennai at the age of 4 to live with her grandparents and access a superior education. Her father worked in isolated tea plantations where high-quality schools were limited. She began her teaching career at age 23 and has taught for over 20 years. In 2010, she relocated to the United States with her husband and their two sons. She pursued her Master's degree in Literacy Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she unearthed her passion for writing. Varadarajan never envisioned becoming a writer but says, “Here I am!” Reflecting on her life, Varadarajan comments,

I think of my grandfather and the profound influence he had on me. You see, he was a master storyteller, and perhaps unknowingly, his storytelling artistry took

root within me. It wasn't until I turned 40 that [my] storytelling voice took flight
(<https://gitavaradarajan.com/>).

Varadarajan has taught in India and the United Arab Emirates and currently teaches at Riverside Elementary School in Princeton, New Jersey
(<https://gitavaradarajan.com/>).

She is the co-writer of the acclaimed middle-grade novel *Save Me a Seat*. A follow-up book, *My Saree*, the second in a series of picture books about Diya, will be released in August 2024 (<https://gitavaradarajan.com/>).

A synopsis of *My Bindi* is found on Varadarajan's website:

Divya is scared to put on the bindi for the first time. What if she gets made fun of? What will it feel like? But Amma [Divya's mother] assures her that her bindi will bring protection. After Divya looks inside Amma's special box to find the perfect bindi to put on, she gazes in the mirror and discovers a new side of herself, and it gives her strength. My Bindi has a universal message of the importance of finding oneself and celebrating the unique beliefs and experiences that make us who we are (<https://gitavaradarajan.com/>).

Varadarajan has received numerous awards and accolades, including, but not limited to:

- Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People
- Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature Best Books
- Junior Library Guild Selection
- Skipping Stones Honor Award (<https://gitavaradarajan.com/>)

- Gene Weingarten (pronouns: he/him), atheist-themed picture book, *Me and Dog*.

Gene Weingarten is an American journalist and former syndicated humor columnist for *The Washington Post*. Weingarten is known for both his serious and comedic work. Weingarten's column, *Below the Beltway*, was published weekly in *The Washington Post* magazine and syndicated nationally by The Washington Post Writers Group until September 2021 (<https://discovery.fclspa.org/>). In addition to his only children's picture book, *Me and Dog*, Weingarten is the author of the books: *The Hypochondriac's Guide to Life*, *One Day: The Extraordinary Story of an Ordinary 24 Hours in America*, *Old Dogs Are the Best Dogs*, *The Fiddler in the Subway: The Story of the World-Class Violinist Who Played for Handouts. . . And Other Virtuoso Performances by America's Foremost Feature Writer* and *I'm with Stupid: One Man, One Woman, 10,000 Years of Misunderstanding Between the Sexes Cleared Right Up*. A synopsis of *Me & Dog* is found on the Simon & Schuster website:

This endearing friendship story about a boy and his dog gently explores a timeless question: who's really in charge? Meet Sid. He's an ordinary kid. He's far from perfect. But to Murphy, Sid's faithful dog, Sid is the whole world. Murphy thinks Sid is the absolute best—and that he's in charge of everything. Sid loves Murphy right back, but he can't help but wonder what Murphy would think if he realized the truth: Sid's just a kid, and Murphy's just a dog, and neither one can control the world. This deceptively simple picture book is the perfect start to a discussion about a subject seldom seen in children's books—the nonthreatening feel of a world based on fact and reason, and not faith (<https://www.simonandschuster.com/>).

Weingarten has received numerous awards and accolades including, but not limited to:

- He is the only two-time Pulitzer Prize winner for Feature Writing
- Kansas NEA Reading Circle List Primary Title for *Me and Dog*
- Fellow, Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University
- Missouri Lifestyle Journalism Award
- National Society of Newspaper Columnists' Ernie Pyle Lifetime Achievement Award

Thematic Category 1: Religious Identity

Religious identity was the first theme to emerge across interviews. Indeed, six authors reported a connection between their own religious, spiritual, or atheistic identity and the content of their picture books. In addition, all authors cited familial and ancestral ties and relationships as influencing their belief systems and storytelling. However, differences emerged across authors regarding their personal practices or belief systems. The results below describe the emergence of the theme of religious identity in addition to connections and dissimilarities.

Matt de la Peña, Christian-themed Picture Book

As reported by de la Peña, his religious and spiritual journey is shaped by the intersecting dynamics of his family and his unique experiences. Growing up, de la Peña felt there was a mix of influences in his household—a Christian mother with deeply held beliefs, though she kept them primarily private, and an atheist father. This blend of religious identities and approaches to the discussion of identity led de la Peña to experience religious ambiguity. Although de la Peña's mother did not take him or other family members to church, she instilled a sense of spirituality through her language and behavioral modeling. de la Peña's Mexican grandmother, who held devout Catholic

beliefs, also contributed to this tapestry of influences. de la Peña remembered her as a very quiet woman. While his grandmother, like his mother, did not overtly teach him about spirituality or religion, her gestures were rich with meaning. A simple touch on his knee during moments of trouble conveyed volumes of unspoken wisdom and love.

Despite the lack of overt religious messages in his childhood home, de la Peña is interested in the role of religion in various communities. In particular, he is fascinated by the role of religion in working-class communities, including his own tough neighborhood and the world of college basketball. He observed how religion often served as a beacon of hope in his life and neighborhood, inspiring people to believe in themselves and their potential. de la Peña thinks that religion provides something essential for human beings—a belief system, a foundation upon which to build their lives. Despite this recognition, de la Peña does not overtly ascribe to any formal belief system. Indeed, de la Peña has found a sense of spirituality in his own life, but as he explained, "I can't categorize it."

Reflecting on his past, de la Peña revealed a deep aversion to any belief system that makes one group feel or present as superior to others. He despises the notion of righteousness and strives to avoid feeling better than or on a more righteous path than other people or communities. This aversion, rooted in a deep sense of humility and respect for all individuals, has shaped his perspective on religion and his place within it.

His spiritual outlook emerged organically, shaped by life experiences rather than explicit teachings. He reflected on the idea that all human beings seek stories to help navigate the complexities of life, and his spirituality was an innate part of that journey. de la Peña's spirituality is rooted in hope, especially during dark moments and challenging situations. He shared, "I always believe in hope." For him, hope is an ever-present

guiding light, a source of strength that transcends specific religious doctrines. Overall, de la Peña's spirituality rests not in rigid principles but in the enduring values of love, humility, and hope that guide his journey through life.

When asked about religious traditions with his wife and children, de la Peña revealed that they observe Christmas and Easter. His wife, of Chinese descent, shares a similar background in which religion was present but not overtly discussed. He explained that he and his wife represent a generation that has a different relationship with formal belief systems. Specifically, he noted that religious labels such as "Catholic" or "Presbyterian" provided clarity in the past, but today, belief systems often exist more subtly beyond the confines of specific religions.

Table 1

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with de la Peña for Research Question One

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Religious traditions in family	"When asked about religious traditions with his wife and children, de la Peña revealed that they observe Christmas and Easter."	Evolution of Religious Traditions
Religious diversity upbringing	"...a mix of influences in his household—a Christian mother... and an atheist father."	Diverse Religious Upbringing
Spiritual influence through gestures	"Her gestures were rich with meaning. A simple touch on his knee during moments of trouble conveyed volumes of unspoken wisdom and love."	Influence of Spiritual Gestures
Hope transcending religious doctrines	"Hope is an ever-present guiding light, a source of strength that transcends specific religious doctrines."	Hope as Universal Guiding Principle
Spirituality shaped by experiences	"His spiritual outlook emerged organically, shaped by life experiences rather than explicit teachings."	Experiential Spirituality

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Spirituality without formal beliefs	"Despite this recognition, de la Peña does not overtly ascribe to any formal belief system."	Spiritual Fluidity and Ambiguity

Reem Faruqi: Muslim-themed Picture Book

Born and raised in Abu Dhabi, Reem Faruqi's early life was marked by a sense of cultural and religious normalcy as she was surrounded by a Muslim community that created a sense of effortless belonging. She recalls, "In Abu Dhabi, it was pretty effortless because there were so many Muslims around us. We didn't stand out. We just sort of blended in."

However, Faruqi's life took a significant turn when her family relocated to the United States, specifically Peachtree City, Georgia, where they became one of the few Muslim families in their new community. This transition led to her developing a sense that she and her family no longer fit in within their community. This change also underscored the need for her to learn to navigate a different cultural landscape. She reflected, "I think that was an adjustment because, all of a sudden, it felt like we were standing out everywhere we went." However, within her family's mosque's walls, Faruqi found a sense of belonging, where she could be with others who shared her faith and identity.

Faruqi's family's religious beliefs grew more solid and important even before her family moved to the United States. She described how her mother enrolled in Islamic classes and began to wear the hijab immediately prior to moving. She noted that this marked a turning point in the family's religious commitment. Faruqi discussed her personal faith journey and her ongoing practice of Islam as evolving from being a child

encouraged by her parents to now taking responsibility for her religious practices and encouraging her children to do the same. Indeed, this process led to Faruqi's development of independence as she discovered how to engage in and express her religious identity.

A pivotal moment in Faruqi's personal and religious journey was her decision to wear the hijab at the age of 15. Despite an initial uneasiness, she felt deeply convinced that she wanted to embrace this symbol of her faith. Faruqi explained, "I remember the first few days feeling weird about it. I practiced wearing it to places like Pizza Hut and Walmart just to get used to it. Once I got more confident wearing it in those settings, I wore it to school, which I think was the hardest because I was the only one." However, Faruqi's experiences as a Muslim in high school were generally positive, with minimal negative encounters, despite the backdrop of the post-9/11 era. She recounted one isolated instance of ethnocentric taunting, but stated the incident did not define her overall experience. Faruqi shared, "I remember one day, I was walking up the stairs at school, and someone saw me. I didn't initially realize people were talking about me. They were saying, "Osama Bin Laden's sister." Faruqi added,

When I moved to America, I felt like the only kid in the whole school who might not be eating lunch during Ramadan. At that point, I'd watch my friend eat delicious sandwiches or French fries and start questioning myself. I might think, "I could eat a French fry, and nobody would really care." I think that could be a time when I would have questioned myself or said, "If I wear hijab and nobody else was wearing one, I may have thought, 'Is this necessary?" Then, I would draw upon my faith and tell myself, "This is important to me." Yes, there have been times like such as those.

The following year in school, Faruqi made a powerful connection with another Muslim girl who chose to wear the hijab, and they became best friends: "I remember the day she wore her hijab to school, and I saw her across the school courtyard. I thought, 'It's not just me!' I was super excited!" Faruqi's experience demonstrates the strength that can be drawn from shared experiences of faith and identity.

Her faith journey continued when she attended Agnes Scott College, where she found a more diverse and accepting community through the Muslim Student Association. She explained, "At the time, I didn't realize what a big impact it would have on me to attend a college with more diverse people. I was so used to being around people who didn't look like me. When I went to a college with more people who practiced their faith like me and looked like me, it almost felt like a breath of fresh air to be around people like me!"

When asked if she believes children have an innate sense of religion or spirituality, Faruqi replied,

I believe so. I also think it depends on the child. For example, our faith is so intertwined with real life in our religion. So, if I were to walk with my once four-year-old, she might point out the trees to me. I would say, "Aren't they beautiful? Who made them?" And she would know the answer is Allah, the Arabic word for God. Then we may say "Subhanallah!" which means "Glory be to God!" So, in that way, I feel Muslim children are exposed to Islam from an early age and in a natural way. Children love nature, and if they wonder who made the trees, the sky, the sun, and the moon, I think they would be curious about spirituality and religion.

Finally, Faruqi's story highlights the challenges and triumphs of navigating faith and cultural identity, and the importance of finding community and acceptance in a diverse world.

Table 2

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Faruqi for Research Question One

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Cultural and religious normalcy	"In Abu Dhabi, it was pretty effortless because there were so many Muslims around us. We didn't stand out. We just sort of blended in."	Identity and Belonging
Feeling of not fitting in	"I think that was an adjustment because, all of a sudden, it felt like we were standing out everywhere we went."	Identity and Belonging
Sense of belonging within mosque	"However, within her family's mosque's walls, Faruqi found a sense of belonging where she could be with others who shared her faith and identity."	Identity and Belonging
Family's religious growth	"Faruqi's family's religious beliefs grew more solid and important even before her family moved to the United States."	Religious Growth and Exploration
Development of independence	"Indeed, this process led to Faruqi's development of independence as she discovered how to engage in and express her religious identity."	Religious Growth and Exploration
Decision to wear hijab	"A pivotal moment in Faruqi's personal and religious journey was her decision to wear the hijab at the age of 15."	Religious Growth and Exploration
Questioning faith	"I think that could be a time when I would have questioned myself or said, 'If I wear hijab and nobody else was wearing one, I may have thought, Is this necessary?' Then, I would draw upon my faith and tell myself, 'This is important to me.'"	Religious Growth and Exploration
Draw upon faith	"Then, I would draw upon my faith and tell myself, 'This is important to me.' Yes, there have been times like such as those."	Religious Growth and Exploration

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Positive high school experiences	"However, Faruqi's experiences as a Muslim in high school were generally positive, with minimal negative encounters, despite the backdrop of the post-9/11 era."	Challenges and Triumphs
Encountering ethnocentric taunting	"She recounted one isolated instance of ethnocentric taunting, but Faruqi stated the incident did not define her overall experience."	Challenges and Triumphs
Challenges during Ramadan	"When I moved to America, I felt like the only kid in the whole school who might not be eating lunch during Ramadan."	Challenges and Triumphs
Impact of diverse community	"Faruqi's story highlights the challenges and triumphs of navigating faith and cultural identity, and the importance of finding community and acceptance in a diverse world."	Challenges and Triumphs
Innate sense of religion or spirituality in children	"So, in that way, I feel Muslim children are exposed to Islam from an early age and in a natural way."	Childhood Spirituality
Exposed to Islam from early age	"Children love nature, and if they wonder who made the trees, the sky, the sun, and the moon, I think they would be curious about spirituality and religion."	Childhood Spirituality
Curiosity about spirituality and religion	"Children love nature, and if they wonder who made the trees, the sky, the sun, and the moon, I think they would be curious about spirituality and religion."	Childhood Spirituality

Amy Hest: Jewish-themed Picture Book

Amy Hest's religious identity and engagement in religious practices are, for her, inherently tied to her family bonds in a story that unfolds with warmth and authenticity. Growing up in a Jewish family, Hest's early religious experience was marked by visits to the synagogue, particularly during the High Holy Days. What made these occasions truly

special, however, was the presence of her beloved grandparents, who played an integral role in shaping her spiritual path. As she reminisced about the days of attending services with her grandparents, her face lit up with memories of the delectable Jewish cuisine her grandparents would bring from their apartment on Riverside Drive in New York City to Hest's childhood home on Long Island. From noodle kugel to rice pudding, sponge cake, and cookies, these dishes were not merely food; they were a tangible expression of love and tradition that left an indelible mark on her heart.

Hest self-reported never having had a bat mitzvah (i.e., a religious ceremony tied to the transition to adulthood). Hest was curious about why she had not undergone this rite of passage, especially when her cousin Nancy had. Her mother's vague responses to Hest's questions about the lack of this event in her religious life did not give Hest a clear picture of why she had not experienced this rite of passage. As Hest understand it, bat mitzvahs for women were relatively novel in the 1960s, and, for unclear reasons, Hest did not participate in this ritual. Despite her attempts to clarify the reason(s) behind this family decision, Hest remains uncertain about why she did not have a bat mitzvah. As her mother has already died, Hest will never receive a more definitive answer about why she did not engage in this rite of passage as a child.

Hest's Jewish identity shined brightly throughout our conversation, and she detailed it and imbued it through her core. For example, she declared, "I am Jewish from head to toe," emphasizing the enduring nature of her faith. It is a constant in her life, providing guidance and strength, even in present-day challenges. Today, Hest's religious identity and engagement with religious practices remain a steadfast part of her life. She is not personally affiliated with a synagogue but joins her son's family in attending theirs.

Her son's deep involvement in the congregation has created opportunities for shared experiences with her son and grandchildren. Although not reported by Hest, it is possible that Hest may be creating rich memories for her grandchildren tied to their religious identity, just as her grandparents did for her. However, this was not directly stated in Hest's interview.

Hest's son was bar mitzvahed, and her daughter was bat mitzvahed. Unlike for Hest, no cultural or religious restrictions were placed on her daughter's participation in this religious ceremony. Her daughter is not as involved in religious activities as her son. However, what resonated most deeply about Hest is her unwavering commitment to certain Jewish traditions. For example, Hest lights Shabbat candles every Friday night, a practice she continues even when alone, and it holds a special place in her heart. Her choice to place a dish rag on her head during this practice connects her to her grandmother's tradition; Hest laughed a little as she said, "That's what she did, so I copy that."

When asked about moments of doubt about her faith or her expression of her Jewish identity, Hest's response was resolute: "Never." Her faith offers a perspective that grounds her during difficult times, especially when she reflects on the historical backdrop of the Holocaust. She explained, "The Holocaust hangs over my head in a big way. I know whatever happens in my life can't compare to that. It's a threshold of unhappiness and terrible things that can happen." Her recognition of the enormity of the Holocaust's horrors has added depth and meaning to her own experiences. During challenging moments, Hest shared that she often finds solace in reflecting on the resilience of those who endured the Holocaust. She wondered aloud, "How do you do it? How are you

brave? How are you possibly brave?" Her questions speak to her awe for the survivors and their incredible strength. It is a humbling perspective that she carries with her. Hest emphasized, "I never have a poor me attitude. It's like anathema for me that I never go there."

Hest's dedication to her religious identity and faith is a testament to the enduring power of faith, family, and tradition in shaping one's identity. Her narrative highlights the interplay between personal belief and collective history, a journey filled with warmth, resilience, and a genuine appreciation for her heritage.

Table 3

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Hest for Research Question One

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Family bonds, warmth	Amy Hest's religious identity and engagement in religious practices are, for her, inherently tied to her family bonds in a story that unfolds with warmth and authenticity.	Family Heritage and Traditions
Jewish upbringing, traditions	Growing up in a Jewish family, Hest's early religious experience was marked by visits to the synagogue, particularly during the High Holy Days.	Family Heritage and Traditions
Commitment to Jewish traditions	Her choice to place a dish rag on her head during this practice connects her to her grandmother's tradition; Hest laughed a little as she said, "That's what she did, so I copy that."	Family Heritage and Traditions
Shared experiences, intergenerational	Her son's deep involvement in the congregation has created opportunities for shared experiences with her son and grandchildren.	Interconnectedness and Intergenerational Bonds
Connection to grandmother's practices	Her choice to place a dish rag on her head during this practice connects her to her grandmother's tradition; Hest laughed a little as she said, "That's what she did, so I copy that."	Interconnectedness and Intergenerational Bonds

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Enduring faith, guidance	Hest's Jewish identity shined brightly throughout our conversation, and she detailed it and imbued it through her core.	Personal Identity and Belief
Resolute faith, no doubts	When asked about moments of doubt about her faith or her expression of her Jewish identity, Hest's response was resolute: "Never."	Personal Identity and Belief
Absence of bat mitzvah	Hest self-reported never having had a bat mitzvah (i.e., a religious ceremony tied to the transition to adulthood).	Questioning and Uncertainty
Uncertainty, unanswered questions	Her mother's vague responses to Hest's questions about the lack of this event in her religious life did not give Hest a clear picture of why she had not experienced this rite of passage.	Questioning and Uncertainty
Reflections on the Holocaust	Her recognition of the enormity of the Holocaust's horrors has added depth and meaning to her own experiences.	Resilience and Faith in Adversity
Perspective on resilience	During challenging moments, Hest shared that she often finds solace in reflecting on the resilience of those who endured the Holocaust.	Resilience and Faith in Adversity
Avoidance of self-pity	Hest emphasized, "I never have a poor me attitude. It's like anathema for me that I never go there."	Resilience and Faith in Adversity

Simran Jeet Singh: Sikh-themed Picture Book

Simran Jeet Singh, a devout Sikh from the heart of Texas, told a unique story of cultural heritage and religious identity that has shaped his profound experiences and perspectives on faith. In children's literature, where stories rarely include discussion of religious and/or spiritual identity, his narrative offers invaluable insights into the complexities of growing up as a Sikh in a region devoid of religious familiarity.

Born to Sikh immigrant parents from Punjab, India, Singh's upbringing was marked by an unwavering commitment to preserving the rich traditions of his religion. The Singh family was one of only a few Sikh families in all of South Texas. Despite their isolation, Singh's parents embarked on a remarkable journey of teaching language and passing down Sikh customs and beliefs to their children. Singh recalled, "Growing up at home, we would learn language. I knew Punjabi before I knew English. We learned scripture, daily prayers we would sing all the time." Singh explained that his parents recognized the importance of their children making connections with other Sikhs beyond South Texas. He explained that while his parents taught him so much at home, he and his siblings would attend Sikh camps and make Sikh friendships from around the country and that it was crucial to have that sense of extended community.

Singh's early exposure to Sikh practices extended beyond language and prayers. His family imparted the essence of Sikhism, including the tradition of music and musical instruments, from a young age. He reminisced, "So much of the daily Sikh practice that's common around the world was part of our upbringing." It was in this nurturing environment that Singh's roots in Sikhism took hold.

Despite this connection to Sikh traditions, Singh confesses that his religious journey was initially more of a familial obligation than a personal choice. He described, "I wouldn't say that I was particularly religious. It was almost more something that I just did." However, a pivotal transformation occurred during his college years, catalyzed by the events surrounding 9/11. Singh witnessed the challenges faced by his Sikh community and experienced his own individual struggles. In this period of uncertainty and adversity, Singh embarked on a path of self-discovery, delving deep into the

teachings of Sikh philosophy. He reflected, "That's when I started studying Sikh teachings and started to consider myself someone who was making a conscious choice to become a Sikh." This marked a turning point in his spiritual journey as he transitioned from going through the motions of Sikhism to becoming a devout practitioner who actively sought to understand and embody its teachings.

Singh's faith has not been immune to moments of doubt and introspection. He acknowledged, "I have had some religious doubts; yes, absolutely, but not as deep of doubt as other people in my family or other people I know in religious communities, but definitely big questions. As a child, I tried to make sense of Sikhism." Some of these doubts came from being one of few Sikh families in South Texas. He compared Sikhism to other religions and wondered, "Oh, Christianity has these ideas; why don't we have these ideas?" or, "This tradition does something that makes sense to me; why don't we do something similar?" Singh was resolute in his constant belief in the existence of the divine. That always felt true to him. He has not doubted the practical relevance of Sikh teachings. As Singh explained, "The way that I was raised to understand Sikh philosophy was always to consider how you apply the teachings to your daily life?" He added that he has never had any crisis of faith.

Singh was asked if he believes children have an innate sense of spirituality, replying, "They absolutely have a sense of awe, wonder, and curiosity about the world. They are also interested in connecting with the world around them."

In summary, Singh's religious journey provides a perspective on the experiences of individuals who write children's books encompassing themes of religious and spiritual identity. His transformation from a cultural inheritor isolated in Southern Texas to a

nationally recognized and socially conscious Sikh illustrates the dynamic interplay between faith, identity, and personal growth.

Table 4

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Singh for Research Question One

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Cultural heritage and identity	Singh's upbringing was marked by an unwavering commitment to preserving the rich traditions of his religion.	Cultural heritage and identity
Family teachings and practices	Singh's parents embarked on a remarkable journey of teaching language and passing down Sikh customs and beliefs to their children.	Cultural heritage and identity
Transition to personal choice	A pivotal transformation occurred during his college years, catalyzed by the events surrounding 9/11. Singh began to consider himself someone who was making a conscious choice to become a Sikh.	Personal journey and transformation
Moments of doubt and introspection	Singh has had some religious doubts, but not as deep as other people in his family or other people he knows in religious communities.	Doubt, introspection, and questioning
Comparative religious exploration	Singh compared Sikhism to other religions and wondered about their differences and similarities.	Comparative religious exploration
Practical application of teachings	Singh was raised to understand Sikh philosophy by considering how to apply the teachings to daily life.	Practical application of teachings
Innate spirituality in childhood	Singh believes children have a sense of awe, wonder, and curiosity about the world and are interested in connecting with it.	Innate spirituality in childhood

Gita Varadarajan: Hindu-themed Picture Book

Gita Varadarajan's journey through life reflects the exploration of her religious experiences and evolving beliefs, marked by her decisions to reject certain rituals and practices as she raised her two sons.

At age four, Varadarjan left her parents and the tea plantation where her family lived in rural India and where her father worked to live with her grandparents in the large metropolitan city of Chennai. This move was necessary for Varadarajan to receive the best possible education. Her grandfather grew up under British rule. The atmosphere of her grandparents' home was formal, and she was expected to follow a complete set of Hindu religious customs. She remarked that her grandfather was a wonderful storyteller. Her grandmother was very strict and insisted that the young Varadarajan always comport herself appropriately. Varadarajan commented that, upon reflection, she believes her grandmother seriously assumed the responsibility of ensuring that Varadarajan would marry well. From lighting lamps and having a dedicated puja room to observing traditional holidays and adorning herself with the bindi and jasmine flowers, she embraced the rich tapestry of rituals that defined her family's faith. However, even as a child, she began questioning the significance of these rituals and the correlation between religious practices and personal goodness. In particular, living with her grandparents and longing for her parents' presence, Varadarajan observed that adults who adhered to these traditions did not always exemplify the goodness they sought through their prayers. This early skepticism made her ponder whether religiosity made one a better person.

Varadarajan's religious experience extended beyond Hinduism. As a child, she attended an Irish Catholic school run by nuns. She learned Christian hymns and experienced the tranquility of church chapels, broadening her spiritual horizons while maintaining her personal beliefs. Varadarajan noted,

I've gone to churches and sat in chapels, and I find that an equally calming and peaceful place. I'm not a deeply ritualistic person, but I think I do believe in

spirituality. For me, places of worship have some kind of an aura around them, and I like going to them; I can experience peace and solace in a church or a temple.

Varadarajan's perspective on religions, including her own, evolved as she matured into adulthood. As a young woman, Varadarajan's mother insisted that she leave her grandparents' home and live at college. Varadarajan felt liberated by being out from under the strict expectations of her grandmother. Later, when she married, it was as if her grandmother's work was done. Varadarajan and her husband viewed themselves as culturally Hindu but did not feel bound to observe all of the religion's tenets. Although she no longer rigidly adhered to traditional rituals, she began to view herself as more spiritual. For her, religion became a source of inner peace and tranquility rather than concerned with external rituals.

Varadarajan's experiences and reflections led her to reject certain rituals and practices that she considered problematic or unfair. When raising her children, she made conscious decisions not to perpetuate these traditions. One significant Hindu ritual she rejected was the "Ayush Homam," performed for her sons' and husband's long life and well-being. Varadarajan questioned its one-sided nature as it exclusively benefited male family members, neglecting her well-being and the well-being of the female family members. The rigidity of customs during the Ayush Homam became a source of consternation for her. Consequently, she and her husband decided to discontinue the ritual, and instead they focused on principles of gender fairness and equality.

Varadarajan also expressed concerns about Hindu gender-based restrictions and practices, particularly during menstruation. She found these practices, such as segregation

from the family and limitations on women's activities, to be disrespectful and demeaning. She objected to these rituals because they perpetuate gender inequality and are misaligned with her spiritual values. In addition, Varadarajan chose not to conduct the traditional "thread ceremony" for her sons, symbolizing their entry into adulthood and Brahmin identity. She questioned the ceremony's significance and its relevance to her evolving beliefs. Again, she and her husband decided that the custom did not hold personal meaning for their family.

In rejecting these rituals and practices, Varadarajan demonstrated her commitment to redefining her religious and cultural identity based on her values. She created a more inclusive and equitable environment for her family, rejecting customs that she believed were oppressive or did not resonate with her inner beliefs. Varadarajan's choices reflect her dedication to a more spiritual and less ritualistic interpretation of her religion, emphasizing the importance of inner values over external practices.

Table 5

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Varadarajan for Research Question One

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Exposure to Christianity	As a child, she attended an Irish Catholic school run by nuns. She learned Christian hymns and experienced the tranquility of church chapels, broadening her spiritual horizons while maintaining her personal beliefs.	Exposure to Diversity of Beliefs
Creating Inclusive Environment	Varadarajan's choices reflect her dedication to a more spiritual and less ritualistic interpretation of her religion, emphasizing the importance of inner values over external practices.	Creating Inclusive Spiritual Environment

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Rejecting Gender-Biased Rituals	Varadarajan questioned its one-sided nature as it exclusively benefited male family members, neglecting her well-being and the well-being of the female family members. The rigidity of customs during the Ayush Homam became a source of consternation for her.	Rejecting Gender Bias and Inequality
Rejection of Traditional Rites	Consequently, she and her husband decided to discontinue the ritual, and instead they focused on principles of gender fairness and equality.	Rejecting Gender Bias and Inequality
Varadarajan's Religious Upbringing	Gita Varadarajan's journey through life reflects the exploration of her religious experiences and evolving beliefs, marked by her decisions to reject certain rituals and practices as she raised her two sons.	Religious Upbringing and Exploration
Evolving Spiritual Beliefs	Although she no longer rigidly adhered to traditional rituals, she began to view herself as more spiritual. For her, religion became a source of inner peace and tranquility rather than concerned with external rituals.	Questioning and Evolving Beliefs
Questioning Religious Practices	However, even as a child, she began questioning the significance of these rituals and the correlation between religious practices and personal goodness.	Questioning and Evolving Beliefs

Gene Weingarten: Atheist-themed Picture Book

Gene Weingarten's family background played a pivotal role in shaping his views on religion and spirituality. Although both of his parents were of Jewish heritage, they did not actively instill any religious beliefs or an overt dedication to a particular religious belief or practice in the home. Instead, his childhood home was one in which religion held no significant place. He wryly recalled how his family observed Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism, a day of atonement where eating is prohibited, by closing the blinds so the neighbors would not see the family eating. This anecdote underscores the extent to which religion was absent; however, there was an awareness and acceptance of

their community's religious observance. Indeed, as Weingarten told it, his family did not wish to observe the religious practice of fasting, but did not wish to offend those in their community who did.

Weingarten's path toward atheism was gradual and contemplative rather than a sudden realization. He could not pinpoint a specific event following which he declared himself an atheist, but he noted that it came about with a sense of logic and reason. He emphasized that his atheism is not accompanied by disdain for religious individuals. He clarified, "I don't feel contempt for people who have faith. I honestly don't." This orientation appears to match the story he told of his own family's choice not to observe Yom Kippur but to respect those in their community who did without judgment.

One particularly notable aspect of Weingarten's perspective on religion is his belief that it may serve as a coping mechanism for some. He views religion as a human construct to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of life and, ultimately, death. It provides solace and meaning, akin to what he calls "secular magic." According to him, this secular magic is a method of seeing beauty and purpose in the world, emphasizing love, care, and kindness for one another. As such, he does not seek to diminish others' religious beliefs, which may be a source of coping.

Weingarten also shared his thoughts on the historical progression of human knowledge, using it to explain his atheistic beliefs. He posited that, over time, humanity has systematically dismantled magical explanations for natural phenomena. He explained, "Everything scientific was once described in magical terms. Gradually, this was dismantled. Over centuries and millennia, mystical explanations, magical explanations, supernatural explanations disappeared as we learned more about truth and

science." In his view, this ongoing process of dismantling magical explanations has existed for millennia, and religion remains the last bastion of magical thinking. He firmly believes that this final element of magical belief will eventually dissipate as humanity continues its pursuit of scientific understanding.

Weingarten was asked if he views children as having spiritual or religious curiosity. He answered by reflecting on his relationship with his two children,

As a young parent, my household was not militantly atheist. We seldom, if ever, discussed it or openly discouraged the subject; we just had nothing to do with it. Our two kids were never discouraged from spirituality; the topic seldom came up. Our daughter told us she wanted to pursue a double major: pre-med and religion. She told me bluntly that having been denied any connection with religion, she was curious about it and wanted to explore it. We had no objections and, of course, expressed none. It seemed like a healthy, intelligent, smart person's choice. Our daughter took four years of religious studies as well as scientific studies. She is not religious in any way. For four years, she studied comparative religions. She found it fascinating as cultural history concluded that religion is organized superstition and mythology, the opposite of the scientist she was destined to be. In the end, she became a veterinarian.

Weingarten's views underscore the complexities of belief, the evolution of human understanding, and the enduring quest for meaning in a world that constantly seeks to demystify the unknown. His personal experiences offer a lens through which to explore the human experiences of those who write children's books with themes of religious and spiritual identity.

Table 6*Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Weingarten for Research Question**One*

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Religion as Coping Mechanism	Coping mechanism view. Secular magic concept. Beauty and purpose in religion.	Exposure to Diversity of Beliefs
Historical Progression of Knowledge	Dismantling magical explanations. Religion as last bastion. Faith's eventual dissipation.	Creating Inclusive Spiritual Environment
Family Background Influence	Family shaping views. Absence of religious upbringing. Awareness of community's religious observance.	Rejecting Gender Bias and Inequality
Gradual Path to Atheism	Gradual realization. Logic and reason. No disdain for faith.	Rejecting Gender Bias and Inequality
Children's Curiosity and Exploration	Children's spiritual curiosity. Daughter's exploration of religion. Acceptance of daughter's choice.	Religious Upbringing and Exploration
Understanding the Complexity	Evolution of understanding. Quest for meaning	Understanding the Complexity

Thematic Category 2: Crafting a Picture Book

Crafting was the second theme to emerge across interviews. Indeed, six authors reported a connection between their own religious, spiritual, or atheist identity and the content of their picture books. In addition, all authors drew upon their own lived experiences to shape the characters in their books. However, differences emerged across authors, such that some authors were motivated by writing about relationships with religious or spiritual themes as part of the background, whereas others were motivated to educate. The results below describe the emergence of the theme of religious identity in addition to connections and dissimilarities.

Matt de la Peña: Christian-themed Picture Book

Primarily, Matt de la Peña's journey to becoming a father for the first time shaped his ideas for writing *Last Stop on Market Street*. As he anticipated the arrival of his daughter, he was deeply contemplative about the messages that inundate children in today's consumer-driven society. He realized that young kids are bombarded with commercial messages telling them what to desire: vacations, toys, or lifestyles. This concern prompted de la Peña to explore the counter-narrative, which became central to the book's theme. He wanted to write about a perspective that encouraged children to appreciate what they already have rather than constantly yearning for more material possessions. This focus allowed de la Peña to craft a narrative that aligns with his belief in the power of hope and the importance of nurturing positive values from an early age. When asked if the book has a Christian theme, de la Peña said it did, but it was clear that he did not set out to make it a book about Christianity.

de la Peña's belief in hope and personal relationships guides his writing. In *Last Stop on Market Street*, the character Nana is modeled after his grandmother. de la Peña's connection with his grandmother and her spiritual outlook significantly influenced this book. Specifically, when writing Nana's character, de la Peña drew inspiration from his grandmother's strong sense of spirituality and how she navigated life. While his grandmother did not impose specific religious practices or rituals on him during his upbringing, her spiritual perspective influenced de la Peña's. In the story, Nana embodies a sense of spirituality, kindness, and wisdom, as evidenced by how she truly hears C.J. and lovingly responds to him when they leave the Church, board the bus, and arrive at the soup kitchen. Her role in the narrative extends beyond being a grandparent; she serves as

a guiding force, teaching her grandson, C.J., to see the world and himself through a lens of beauty and gratitude. As such, Nana's character also represents the broader idea of nurturing and modeling a spiritually grounded presence in a child's life.

When commenting about the theme of the book, de la Peña noted,

For me, it's about a grandmother who's trying to teach her grandson to see himself as beautiful. At the same time, most people think of it as she's trying to teach him to see his community as beautiful. But also, I think the more universal theme for me is the question of how you choose to see the world.

de la Peña's reflection on the universal theme is expressed in a verbal exchange between C.J. and Nana as they disembark the bus. The illustration depicts a rundown neighborhood. C.J. takes Nana's hand and asks her, "How come it's always so dirty over here?" Nana smiles and points to the sky. "Sometimes when you're surrounded by dirt, C.J., you're a better witness for what's beautiful."

de la Peña explained, "It would be irresponsible to write a story without hope because I think that's a beautiful thing to study as a reader. How do we find it? So that's important to me." In addition to his family members and their spiritual legacy, de la Peña said he was influenced by African-American female writers, such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston, because of the spiritual themes that surface in their writing. For similar reasons, he also described being fascinated by Latino authors, who included how the Catholic Church functions in Latino communities.

When I asked de la Peña if he considered both the child and the adult audiences when he was writing, he responded,

Yes, I love that relationship of sharing books, but I want to always err on the child's side. I think some of my favorite picture books are the ones that I think are the strongest honor the psychology of the child. Look at Where the Wild Things Are. There are so many books that honor the psychology of the child, but that one is fantastic. You're watching a child go to this place where the wild things are. Then, it's like the child is trying on adult sensibility. Sending the monsters to bed without their dinner is like watching a child process the adult world through that picture book and then return to the real world. I love books that do that. So, that's not thinking about the adult in the equation. It's thinking only about the kid.

I asked de la Peña if he would change anything in his book; he acknowledged that no book is without imperfections. He mentioned that he is okay with flaws once a book goes out into the world. It took de la Peña about seven months to write *Last Stop on Market Street*. He understands that each work may have its unique flaws. However, he believes these imperfections can be valuable and allow for meaningful discussions and interpretations by readers.

He appreciates that readers may perceive his stories differently and encourages open dialogue about his work. This perspective underscores his belief that literature can be a tool for facilitating conversations and exploring diverse viewpoints. In addition, de la Peña expresses his appreciation for how books can be used as tools in different ways. He commended the "unique and fresh angle" the interviewer brought to their interpretations of his work. He values the exploration of themes related to working-class communities, public transportation, and the religious aspects of *Last Stop on Market*

Street. He further encourages a deeper exploration of books and their multifaceted layers, highlighting the potential for diverse perspectives and discussions from such analysis.

In closing, while some may perceive a Christian theme in his work, de la Peña's intention focuses on universal themes of self-worth and the way we choose to perceive the world. He values the psychology of children when writing, emphasizing their perspective. de la Peña embraces the imperfections in his work, recognizing their potential for meaningful discussions. He encourages readers to engage in open dialogues and sees literature as a tool for facilitating conversations and exploring diversity.

Table 7

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with de la Peña for Research Question

Two

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Counter-narrative against consumerism	... This concern prompted de la Peña to explore the counter-narrative, which became central to the book's theme.	Counteracting Consumerism
Influence of African-American and Latino authors	...he was influenced by African-American female writers, such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston...	Cultural and Literary Influences
Embracing imperfection for dialogue	...He acknowledges that each work may have its unique flaws. However, he believes these imperfections can be valuable...	Embracing Imperfection for Dialogue
Seeing beauty amidst adversity	...‘Sometimes when you’re surrounded by dirt, C.J., you’re a better witness for what’s beautiful.’	Finding Beauty in Adversity
Honoring child psychology	...favorite picture books are the ones that I think are the strongest honor the psychology of the child...	Honoring Child Psychology
Importance of hope and faith	...‘It would be irresponsible to write a story without hope because I think that's a beautiful thing to study...	Importance of Hope and Faith

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Fatherhood shaping themes	Primarily, de la Peña's journey to becoming a father for the first time shaped de la Peña's ideas...	Personal and Family Influence
Influence of grandmother's spirituality	...de la Peña drew inspiration from his grandmother's strong sense of spirituality and how she navigated life...	Spiritual Guidance and Mentorship

Reem Faruqi: Muslim-themed Picture Book

Reem Faruqi's discussion of her writing included themes of identity, education, faith, and empathy that intertwined to shape the stories she crafts and her approach to sharing them. Faruqi's exploration of religion and spirituality in her picture books did not emerge from a deliberate plan but rather from an organic realization of their significance in her experiences and the educational landscape she navigates.

Initially, as a second-grade public school teacher, she hesitated to delve into religious themes in her writing. She explained that she was influenced by the experiences of another Muslim author, Maha Adassi, who wrote *The White Nights of Ramadan*. Adassi's work and her blog post about her editor's immediate interest in stories about Ramadan resonated with Faruqi. This information and potential interest in the representation of Muslim holidays in literature sparked Faruqi's realization of the potential of writing about religion in her work and prompted her to explore her faith through writing children's picture books. Reflecting on other sources of inspiration for including themes of religion and spirituality in her writing, she recalled a pivotal moment when she was cooking for her family, and the idea for her story surfaced. She found a direction for her narrative. A protagonist named Lailah would mirror Faruqi's experiences and navigate the challenge of expressing her faith in a new environment.

For her book, *Lailah's Lunchbox*, Faruqi shared how she drew directly from her childhood memories and experiences as a Muslim immigrant in the United States. She likened her experiences to feeling like a fish out of water. She also specifically detailed her struggle to explain Ramadan to her American classmates. In her book, Lailah's journey echoes Faruqi's challenges, reflecting the complexities of cultural adaptation and the desire for acceptance. Through Lailah's journey, Faruqi weaves her lived experiences of adaptation and acceptance in a new country, infusing her narrative with authenticity and relatability.

In addition, Faruqi explained that some of her personal qualities are even reflected in the portrayal of Lailah, such as her childhood shyness. Indeed, Faruqi's reticence to speak up as a young child and recent immigration to America mirrors Lailah's struggle to articulate her faith to her classmates. This shared experience underscores the authenticity of Faruqi's storytelling as she draws upon personal anecdotes and emotions to create relatable characters and narratives.

Family relationships also influenced Faruqi's decision to include religion and spirituality in her writing. Specifically, she shared an anecdote about her father's jovial remark about what the neighbors might think of their early morning Ramadan meals when they first moved to America. Although not directly shared by Faruqi, this memory may demonstrate her father's awareness of the challenges the family might face in America and his modeling of how to cope with being different from their neighbors (i.e., humor). This memory also highlighted the everyday moments of connection and shared experiences that Faruqi seeks to capture in her stories, emphasizing the universality of human experiences across cultural and religious boundaries.

The decision to write about Ramadan specifically stemmed from Faruqi's observation of a dearth of children's literature addressing Islamic practices in school settings. Drawing from her background as a second-grade teacher, she consciously situates her stories within the familiar context of classrooms, recognizing the significance of representation for Muslim students. As she explained, "The target audience for *Lailah's Lunchbox* is a mainstream setting. I used to teach second grade in a public school. For those reasons, I was always trying to stay cautious about how I wrote about my faith because I wanted my book to be read in a public classroom."

Faruqi's motivation for including religious themes in her books is not to proselytize but to gently educate and foster understanding and empathy among readers of all faiths. Though she did not explicitly state this, perhaps the next generation of students will be more knowledgeable and kindly curious when a classmate describes an unfamiliar religious or cultural holiday after reading her book. Faruqi recognizes that her writing exemplifies the power of storytelling to bridge cultural divides and cultivate empathy, underscoring the transformative potential of literature in fostering inclusive communities.

Table 8

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Faruqi for Research Question Two

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Personal Inspiration and Reflection	Faruqi's exploration of religion and spirituality in her picture books did not emerge from a deliberate plan but from an organic realization of their significance...	Personal Inspiration and Reflection
Personal Inspiration and Reflection	Faruqi explained she was influenced by the experiences of another Muslim author, Maha Adassi, who wrote <i>The White Nights of Ramadan</i> ...	Personal Inspiration and Reflection

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Personal Inspiration and Reflection	Reflecting on other sources of inspiration for including themes of religion and spirituality in her writing, she recalled a pivotal moment when she was cooking for her family...	Personal Inspiration and Reflection, Cultural Representation and Adaptation
Personal Inspiration and Reflection	In addition, Faruqi explained that some of her personal qualities are even reflected in the portrayal of Lailah, such as her childhood shyness...	Personal Inspiration and Reflection
Cultural Representation and Adaptation	For her book, <i>Lailah's Lunchbox</i> , Faruqi shared how she drew directly from her childhood memories and experiences as a Muslim immigrant in the United States...	Cultural Representation and Adaptation
Familial Influence	Family relationships also influenced Faruqi's decision to include religion and spirituality in her writing...	Familial Influence
Educational Awareness and Representation	The decision to write about Ramadan specifically stemmed from Faruqi's observation of a dearth of children's literature addressing Islamic practices in school settings...	Educational Awareness and Representation
Educational Awareness and Representation	Faruqi explained, "The target audience for <i>Lailah's Lunchbox</i> is a mainstream setting. I used to teach second grade in a public school. For those reasons, I was always trying to stay cautious about how I wrote about my faith because I wanted my book to be read in a public classroom."	Educational Awareness and Representation
Educational Awareness and Representation	Faruqi's motivation for including religious themes in her books is not to proselytize but to gently educate and foster understanding and empathy among readers of all faiths...	Educational Awareness and Representation, Empathy and Understanding
Empathy and Understanding	Although she did not explicitly state this, perhaps the next generation of students will be more knowledgeable and kindly curious when a classmate describes an unfamiliar	Empathy and Understanding

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
	religious or cultural holiday after reading her book...	

Amy Hest: Jewish-themed Picture Book

Amy Hest, the acclaimed author of numerous children's books, including *The Friday Nights of Nana*, has a distinct writing process deeply intertwined with her familial relationships, experiences, and religious values. Her creative endeavors include a subtle inclination towards writing about religion and spirituality.

Hest's storytelling is an extension of herself. As she explains, "All of my books are always about me. No matter what I look like in the book or what I call myself, whether I'm a duck, a child, a bear, or whatever I am, I'm always in the book somewhere." Her childhood memories, especially those of visiting her grandparents' cluttered apartment on Riverside Drive, serve as rich inspiration. Despite the chaos of the Riverside Drive apartment, she found solace and joy in those moments, especially in the company of her grandmother. These recollections have fueled her imagination and led to stories such as *The Friday Nights of Nana* that reflect her appreciation for cherished family traditions and intimate connections.

A deep focus on authentic personal and familial connections marks the impetus of her writing. She emphasizes the importance of one-on-one interactions, including religion, and strives to elevate her storytelling, refusing to condescend or write down to children. She aptly noted,

I can't be bothered thinking about my audience because I'm having too much trouble writing a good sentence. I can't think about who might read it five years down the road. But something very important to me is always to write up.

Children are smaller than adults, but that doesn't mean you should write down to them. I always strive to elevate, and writing up is the only way to describe it.

Hest continued,

When I'm in the process of writing, I find myself talking constantly to ensure that the dialogue flows naturally. I repeat it aloud many times, striving to ensure the dialogue is fluid and doesn't sound demeaning. I know an awful lot of adults who talk down to children, and it's nauseating. Hopefully, I don't do that in my stories or life.

A common thread throughout Hest's books is the importance of expressing love for those close to you and creating an atmosphere of warmth and comfort. Hest explained that "cozy" is a fundamental concept in her life. She is drawn toward all things "cozy." Hest hoped this story imparted a sense of coziness, underscoring the idea that family should evoke comfort and warmth. She recognized that this is not always the case; however, there is always the potential to discover those precious, cozy moments with loved ones. Because Hest's relationships with those closest to her often included or spoke to aspects of her Jewish identity (e.g., High Holidays with her grandparents), elements of religion and spirituality naturally occur in her work.

For Hest, writing is rooted in her identity and religious heritage. She reflected, "I'm Jewish, and my people are Jewish, and the people I write about tend to be Jewish. It's because that's my comfort." She light-heartedly recalled her birth as a Jewish storyteller, rooted in a childhood anecdote shared around the Shabbat table. She recounted,

I made up this incredible story. I was a very quiet six-year-old girl and incredibly laid back. The whole family, including my grandparents, was at the dinner table, and I suddenly announced, "The man was here again today." Everybody looked at me and said, "What man?" I replied, "The man with the black Cadillac. He takes Mommy for a ride when he comes in his black Cadillac." The jaws were dropping at the table.

This experience began Hest's journey as a Jewish storyteller, shaping her narrative voice and inspiring her creativity.

Hest invites readers into her world through her stories, where love, family, and Jewish traditions intersect. She ended her interview by saying,

You make me want to write another story about a Jewish family; I'll tell you that. Because, again, it's who I am. It's just who I am. It's basic. Whether it's the bagel and cream cheese that I eat, which is certainly a universal food now, but I claim it as Jewish. It's the food; it's everything.

Hest sees herself as a Jewish storyteller. She appreciates cozy relationships and multigenerational themes. She labors over word choices and sentences to elevate her writing out of respect for her young readers. She recognizes their intelligence and natural curiosity.

Table 9

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Hest for Research Question Two

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Authentic connections: Personal and familial	A deep focus on authentic personal and familial connections marks the impetus of her writing.	Authentic Expression of Identity

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Jewish identity: Rooted in Jewish heritage	Because Hest’s relationships with those closest to her often included or spoke to aspects of her Jewish identity (e.g., High Holidays with her grandparents), elements of religion and spirituality naturally occur in her work.	Authentic Expression of Identity
Narrative voice: Shaped by Jewish storytelling	Hest sees herself as a Jewish storyteller. She appreciates cozy relationships and multigenerational themes.	Authentic Expression of Identity
Cozy atmosphere: Importance of coziness	A common thread throughout Hest's books is the importance of expressing love for those close to you and creating an atmosphere of warmth and comfort. Hest hoped this story imparted a sense of coziness.	Cultivating Cozy Connections
Multigenerational themes: Importance of family	Hest appreciates cozy relationships and multigenerational themes.	Cultivating Cozy Connections
Elevating storytelling: Write up, Dialogue refinement	Hest strives to elevate her storytelling, refusing to condescend or write down to children.	Elevating Children's Understanding
Respect for young readers: Avoiding condescension	Hest recognizes their intelligence and natural curiosity.	Elevating Children's Understanding
Personal inspiration: Childhood memories	Her childhood memories, especially those of visiting her grandparents' cluttered apartment on Riverside Drive, serve as rich inspiration. These recollections have fueled her imagination and led to stories such as <i>The Friday Nights of Nana</i> that reflect her appreciation for cherished family traditions and intimate connections.	Personal Inspiration and Family Heritage
Family traditions: <i>Friday Nights of Nana</i>	Stories such as <i>The Friday Nights of Nana</i> that reflect her appreciation for cherished family traditions and intimate connections.	Personal Inspiration and Family Heritage
Authentic connections:	A deep focus on authentic personal and familial connections marks the impetus of her writing.	Authentic Expression of Identity

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Personal and familial		

Singh Jeet Singh: Sikh-themed Picture Book

Simran Jeet Singh’s decision to embark on writing a children's picture book was rooted in his childhood aspiration:

Since childhood, I have always intended to write books with Sikh characters. That was always clear to me. For years, all I really knew was that I wanted to get cultural and religious literacy out there. I wanted to have stories about people who look like the people in my community. I wanted the public to have an opportunity to learn about and humanize people that they wouldn't know about otherwise.

This desire to promote cultural understanding and representation led him to delve into the life of his hero, Fauja Singh. Fauja Singh was born with a physical disability and lacked access to formal schooling, but eventually ran his first marathon when he was in his eighties.

Singh's writing process was deeply influenced by Fauja Singh’s willingness to share his vulnerabilities with him and his determination to overcome them. Singh explained that Fauja Singh sometimes wondered if he had fully utilized opportunities to serve as an example for children. To honor Fauja Singh, Singh celebrated his story and achievements in a picture book for children. Singh’s relationship with Fauja Singh also allowed him to gain additional appreciation and respect for his parents’ immigration story and resilience. Through Singh's narrative, he found parallels to his parents' experiences and explored themes of resilience and isolation. These themes organically found their

way into his writing, adding emotional depth to the story. Singh commented on his parents' immigration experience:

It wasn't something that I intended or expected even, but the story of Fauja's immigration struck me in part because it pushed me to reflect on my parents' immigration story. When he flew to England, he was on his own. He was on his own, but my parents had each other. I think trying to imagine this experience, that I haven't had personally, of my parents coming to this country not knowing anyone, leaving what was otherwise a really comfortable life and starting fresh and how isolating and lonely that could be. It's something I hadn't considered before. When I read the book, that's probably one of the most poignant and emotional moments. I know other people read it differently sometimes, and that's okay, but that's the part where it feels very personal to me, even though it's not actually my own experience that I'm trying to illustrate in the book.

Regarding his attention to both parent and child readers, Singh explained that he explicitly considers intergenerational dynamics between parents and children in crafting his narrative. Initially focused solely on Faujah Singh's story, Singh later recognized the potential for fostering meaningful conversations between generations while reading his book. This realization prompted him to infuse the narrative with themes of racism, access, and resilience, potentially encouraging more profound dialogues within families. Indeed, as Singh expressed,

I think religions are really important. One goal in writing this book was to make it a vehicle for people to discuss religious differences. We could just talk about our religious identities and communities without being in your face about it, without

proselytizing, or threatening other people, but just to share the beauty of where we come from, how we believe, and how we live.

Regarding sensitivity, Singh initially underestimated the need for sensitivity reading for the portrayal of disability. In addition, he later acknowledged the importance of having a team familiar with Sikh culture and religion involved in the editorial process to examine the portrayal of Sikhism. This collaboration ensured authenticity in portraying Fauja Singh's story and its fullest context.

Singh's book is the first to feature a Sikh main character and to be published by a mainstream publishing house, Penguin Random House. Singh has attained his dream of writing a book that mirrors Sikh characters that look like him and those within his community. His book also challenges assumptions and has the potential to foster empathy in those looking through the window of this story at Sikh culture. He believes that seeing the humanity in those who appear different from oneself could lead to greater understanding and connection. Despite skepticism about the market for his book, Singh remained steadfast in his belief in its universal appeal. Singh's hopes for the book have been realized as it has received numerous awards and accolades, as noted in the introduction to this chapter.

Reflecting on his writing journey, Singh expressed minor regrets about certain aspects of the book, such as inconsistencies in the narrative cadence and the cover design. These details, though minor, underscore his commitment to crafting a story that authentically represents Faujah Singh's life and the Sikh community.

In summary, Singh's writing process was shaped by his childhood aspirations to see Sikh characters in books, his familial reflections, and a commitment to fostering

empathy and understanding through storytelling. Through exploring Fauja Singh's life in his book, Singh sought to challenge stereotypes, spark meaningful conversations, and promote cultural and religious literacy.

Table 10

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Singh for Research Question Two

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Childhood aspiration: Sikh characters	Since childhood, I have always intended to write books with Sikh characters. That was always clear to me. For years, all I really knew was that I wanted to get cultural and religious literacy out there. I wanted to have stories about people who look like the people in my community. I wanted the public to have an opportunity to learn about and humanize people that they wouldn't know about otherwise.	Cultural Representation and Literacy
Cultural and religious literacy	Since childhood, I have always intended to write books with Sikh characters. That was always clear to me. For years, all I really knew was that I wanted to get cultural and religious literacy out there. I wanted to have stories about people who look like the people in my community. I wanted the public to have an opportunity to learn about and humanize people that they wouldn't know about otherwise.	Cultural Representation and Literacy
Representation in storytelling	Singh's book is the first to feature a Sikh main character and to be published by a mainstream publishing house, Penguin Random House. Singh attained his dream of writing a book that mirrors Sikh characters that look like him and those within his community. His book also challenges assumptions and has the potential to foster empathy in those looking through the window of this story at Sikh culture.	Cultural Representation and Literacy
Hero's vulnerabilities and determination	Singh's writing process was deeply influenced by Fauja Singh's willingness to share his vulnerabilities and determination to	Personal Connection and Inspiration

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Relationship with Fauja Singh	<p>overcome them with Singh. Singh explained that Fauja Singh sometimes wondered if he had fully utilized opportunities to serve as an example for children.</p> <p>Singh's writing process was deeply influenced by Fauja Singh's willingness to share his vulnerabilities and determination to overcome them with Singh. Singh explained that Fauja Singh sometimes wondered if he had fully utilized opportunities to serve as an example for children. To honor Faujah Singh, Singh celebrated his story and achievements in a picture book for children.</p>	Personal Connection and Inspiration
Intergenerational dynamics	Regarding his attention to both parent and child readers, Singh explained that he explicitly considers intergenerational dynamics between parents and children in crafting his narrative. Initially focused solely on Faujah Singh's story, Singh later recognized the potential for fostering meaningful conversations between generations while reading his book.	Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding
Themes of racism, access, resilience	Initially focused solely on Faujah Singh's story, Singh later recognized the potential for fostering meaningful conversations between generations while reading his book. This realization prompted him to infuse the narrative with themes of racism, access, and resilience, potentially encouraging more profound dialogues within families.	Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding
Fostering conversations about religious differences	I think religions are really important. One goal in writing this book was to make it a vehicle for people to discuss religious differences. We could just talk about our religious identities and communities without being in your face about it, without proselytizing, or threatening other people, but just to share the beauty of where we come from, how we believe, and how we live.	Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Sensitivity reading and cultural authenticity	In addition, he later acknowledged the importance of having a team familiar with Sikh culture and religion involved in the editorial process to examine the portrayal of Sikhism. This collaboration ensured authenticity in portraying Fauja Singh's story and its fullest context.	Sensitivity and Authenticity
Minor regrets in crafting authenticity	Reflecting on his writing journey, Singh expressed minor regrets about certain aspects of the book, such as inconsistencies in the narrative cadence and the cover design. These details, though minor, underscored his commitment to crafting a story that authentically represented Faujah Singh's life and the Sikh community.	Sensitivity and Authenticity
Immigrant experience reflections	Regarding sensitivity, Singh initially underestimated the need for sensitivity reading for the portrayal of disability. In addition, he later acknowledged the importance of having a team familiar with Sikh culture and religion involved in the editorial process to examine the portrayal of Sikhism. This collaboration ensured authenticity in portraying Fauja Singh's story and its fullest context.	Immigrant Experience Reflections
First Sikh main character in mainstream publishing	Singh's book is the first to feature a Sikh main character and to be published by a mainstream publishing house, Penguin Random House.	Cultural Representation and Literacy
Challenging assumptions and fostering empathy	Singh's book is the first to feature a Sikh main character and to be published by a mainstream publishing house, Penguin Random House. Singh attained his dream of writing a book that mirrors Sikh characters that look like him and those within his community. His book also challenges assumptions and has the potential to foster empathy in those looking through the window of this story at Sikh culture.	Cultural Representation and Literacy

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Universal appeal despite skepticism	Despite skepticism about the market for his book, Singh remained steadfast in his belief in its universal appeal. Singh’s hopes for the book have been realized as it has received numerous awards and accolades, as noted in the introduction to this chapter.	Cultural Representation and Literacy
Promoting empathy and understanding through storytelling	In summary, Singh's writing process was shaped by his childhood aspirations to see Sikh characters in books, his familial reflections, and a commitment to fostering empathy and understanding through storytelling. Through exploring Fauja Singh's life in his book, Singh sought to challenge stereotypes, spark meaningful conversations, and promote cultural and religious literacy.	Cultural Representation and Literacy

Gita Varadarajan: Hindu-themed Picture Book

Gita Varadarajan explores identity, Hinduism, culture, and the journey towards self-acceptance in *My Bindi*. Her storytelling reflects her experiences and observations, interwoven with themes of authenticity and empowerment. Central to Varadarajan's narrative is the symbolism of the bindi—a traditional Hindu adornment worn in the middle of women’s foreheads that represents cultural heritage and spirituality. Reflecting on her upbringing, Varadarajan recalled, "We wear the bindi because it's a tradition that's passed on from generation to generation." Her exploration of the bindi's significance reflects her curiosity and desire to understand her cultural roots.

Varadarajan's decision to write about religion and spirituality was driven by a desire to challenge societal biases and empower individuals to embrace their complete selves, including aspects of their religious and cultural identities. She shared, “I wrote that book because some children said they were scared to wear a bindi to school because they would be made fun of. I wrote for those kids I saw struggling with wearing the bindi

in the schools I visited.” Varadarajan hoped to foster empathy and understanding among her Hindu and non-Hindu readers by sharing personal anecdotes and reflections. Before writing her book, Varadarajan researched and discussed Hindu spirituality and traditions with knowledgeable individuals, seeking to deepen her understanding of the bindi's significance. She mentioned, "I did research and talked to some yogis and people who know about the body, the different chakras, and the energy points in the body." This research gave her insight into the spiritual and symbolic meanings associated with the bindi, such as its representation of the third eye.

Through *My Bindi*, Varadarajan was motivated to create a narrative to start conversations between children and adults in which children could freely discuss their identities without fear of judgment. From Varadarajan’s perspective, setting the story in the context of an elementary school and a Hindu home allows teachers, parents, and other significant adults to facilitate dialogue about identities and make text-to-self connections.

Varadarajan's portrayal of a Hindu family in the book has a specific purpose: to provide a mirror for Hindu children to see themselves and a window for other children to see into a Hindu home. Varadarajan offers insight into the rituals within the family unit, emphasizing the importance of cultural continuity and pride. This mirror and window provide an opportunity for both representation and empathy among Varadarajan’s readers.

Varadarajan discussed a poignant moment between Divya, the main character in her book, and her mother. Varadarajan highlighted the gentle encouragement provided by Divya's mother to engage in the family’s religious and cultural practices: "It's almost like when a child is scared to do something. Sometimes you need to give that little nudge and

push." She portrays Divya's mother as offering gentle guidance, urging Divya to try wearing a bindi and also assuring her that she can choose for herself. This interaction subtly underscores the supportive relationship between mother and daughter and emphasizes the significance of familial encouragement in guiding children toward self-discovery. In some ways, Varadarajan's book provides this gentle encouragement for her readers, who may be inspired to engage further in their own cultural and religious practices and also learn more about the cultural and religious traditions of others.

Finally, although Varadarajan underscores the importance of Hindu children knowing who they are, she also wants *all* children to know themselves. She said, "*My Bindi* is about giving every child the courage to be their whole selves." Through her book, Varadarajan seeks to instill a sense of self-assurance and pride in any cultural identity, ensuring that all children feel empowered to embrace their identity with confidence and resilience.

Table 11

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Varadarajan for Research

Question Two

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Empowerment through Representation	"Varadarajan's decision to write about religion and spirituality was driven by a desire to challenge societal biases and empower individuals to embrace their complete selves."	Empowering Cultural Identity
Cultural Continuity and Pride	"Varadarajan's portrayal of a Hindu family in the book has a specific purpose: to provide a mirror for Hindu children to see themselves and a window for other children to see into a Hindu home."	Empowering Cultural Identity
Inclusivity and Self-Assurance	"Finally, although Varadarajan underscores the importance of Hindu children knowing	Empowering Cultural Identity

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
	who they are, she also wants <i>all</i> children to know themselves."	
Challenging Societal Biases	"Varadarajan hoped to foster empathy and understanding among her Hindu and non-Hindu readers by sharing personal anecdotes and reflections."	Challenging Biases and Stereotypes
Facilitating Dialogue on Identity	"Through My Bindi, Varadarajan was motivated to create a narrative to start conversations between children and adults in which children could freely discuss their identities without fear of judgment."	Fostering Dialogue and Understanding
Supportive Familial Guidance	"This interaction subtly underscores the supportive relationship between mother and daughter and emphasizes the significance of familial encouragement in guiding children toward self-discovery."	Encouraging Self-Discovery and Acceptance
Encouragement for Self-Discovery	"In some ways, Varadarajan's book provides this gentle encouragement for her readers, who may be inspired to engage further in their own cultural and religious practices and also learn more about the cultural and religious traditions of others."	Encouraging Self-Discovery and Acceptance

Gene Weingarten: Atheist-themed Picture Book

Gene Weingarten, a distinguished writer with a profound respect for animals and a keen observer of human behavior, juxtaposed themes of atheism with the intricate bond shared between people and their dogs in his book *Me & Dog*. Rooted in a painful moment with his cherished dog Murphy, the inspiration for the book unfolded with profound introspection and revelation. Specifically, Weingarten recounted an incident during which he accidentally stepped on Murphy's foot. Murphy yelped and seemed to seek Weingarten's forgiveness for the incident. It was an "aha" moment for Weingarten, triggering thoughts about authority and apology. Weingarten said, "I don't mean to make too much of this moment; it was a children's book, but it really did occur to me this was

about conceptions of God. What she thought I was, but what I wasn't. I wasn't punishing her.”

In his narrative, Weingarten articulated the subtle yet profound parallels between his dog's perception of him and the human conception of God, shedding light on themes of misunderstanding and projection. His frustration with what he deemed the proliferation of disingenuous narratives about religion in children's literature fueled a need within Weingarten to write about atheism. He explained,

I was enraged when I looked online and discovered what kids were being told about religion. These books sold way more than anything I ever wrote. They were absurd, and they were clinging to our greatest fears and hopes in what I thought was a completely dishonest way.

Weingarten's writing was not merely an act of literary creation but also a manifestation of what he described as “controlled anger,” driven by his humanitarian perspective and a desire to challenge societal norms without resorting to proselytizing. He explained, "There was anger behind writing this book, but it was controlled anger... I didn't want it to be proselytizing for atheism. I wanted people to know about atheism." Indeed, Weingarten did not actively seek to turn children away from religion but instead sought to offer another perspective in an arena he saw as dominated by a single perspective.

He acknowledged the intentional use of the anagram between "dog" and "god" as a thematic device, inviting readers to contemplate the parallels between the human–dog relationship and conventional religious beliefs. As he said,

Clearly, the book's central thesis has to do with my dog regarding me the way people regard God. That's not a coincidence. Dog and God being anagrams was the reason for the cover title. Me and dog, and me and God, that was an intended double entendre.

Weingarten also reflected on the book's universal theme, emphasizing the importance of resilience in the face of societal pressures and the courage to challenge entrenched beliefs. He explained, "They lead into each other. 'Don't be manipulated by a society that wants to force religion into everything, and don't be scared.' This is the more important part, 'Don't be scared of the notion that there is no God. Love still exists. Kindness still exists.'"

On each page of *Me & Dog*, Weingarten's voice resonates with a sense of conviction, urging readers to consider the notion that goodness and love transcend religious doctrines, inviting them to contemplate intellectual exploration and introspection with criticality. Through the character of Sid and his faithful canine companion, Weingarten sought to encourage a dialogue about existential questions and the nature of belief, offering readers a gentle invitation to explore alternative perspectives and embrace authenticity in their journey of self-discovery.

Table 12

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Weingarten for Research Question

Two

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Universal theme of resilience and courage	"Don't be manipulated by a society that wants to force religion into everything, and don't be scared."	Promotion of Resilience and Courage

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Author's inspiration: Dog–Murphy incident	"It was an 'aha' moment for Weingarten, triggering thoughts about authority and apology."	Personal Inspiration and Reflection
Author's frustration with children's literature	"I was enraged when I looked online and discovered what kids were being told about religion."	Critique of Religious Children's Literature
Author's controlled anger	"There was anger behind writing this book, but it was controlled anger... I didn't want it to be proselytizing for atheism."	Controlled Expression of Anger
Intentional use of "dog" and "god" anagram	"Dog and God being anagrams was the reason for the cover title."	Intentional Symbolism and Parallelism
Invitation to contemplate intellectual exploration and introspection	"Through the character of Sid and his faithful canine companion, Weingarten sought to encourage a dialogue about existential questions and the nature of belief."	Encouragement of Intellectual Exploration
Universal theme of resilience and courage	"Don't be manipulated by a society that wants to force religion into everything, and don't be scared."	Promotion of Resilience and Courage

Thematic Category 3: Public Perceptions

Public perceptions were the third theme to emerge across interviews. Indeed, six authors reported varying levels of public support for their work. Interestingly, none of the authors reported absolute expectations from their religious, spiritual, or atheist communities to serve as de facto representatives. Differences emerged across authors such that most felt that their work was well received; however, one did not get the reception he had anticipated. The results below describe the emergence of theological themes and the materialization of other themes.

Matt de la Peña: Christian-themed Picture Book

Matt de la Peña reflected on the reception of *Last Stop on Market Street*, acknowledging its polarizing nature due to the book's use of non-standard English vernacular. Critics have questioned his linguistic choices, framing them as divergent from traditional educational approaches aimed at children. He recounts receiving emails from individuals expressing sentiments such as, "We spend all our time trying to teach kids to speak proper English, and a book like this comes along."

In response to these critiques, de la Peña draws parallels between his protagonist, C.J., and the concept of code-switching. He highlights C.J.'s ability to adapt his speech based on context, suggesting a fluidity in language usage that extends beyond rigid norms. "Also, a kid like C.J., he knows how to code-switch," de la Peña remarked, resolute that his narrative choices reflect real life. de la Peña's use of non-standard English vernacular also demonstrates a truth: that many children (and adults) speak in home languages rarely represented in children's picture books. As such, de la Peña's book may provide a unique opportunity for children to see their home language portrayed in a picture book or allow other children to experience the depiction of a different vernacular.

de la Peña also encountered questions from readers regarding his portrayal of religious elements, particularly the Church. Some questioned whether this specificity made the story too narrow in scope. Reflecting on these inquiries, de la Peña recognized the secular progressive viewpoint, suggesting moving beyond religious literature references. Despite acknowledging this viewpoint, he emphasized that his focus remained on character development rather than ideological agendas.

Throughout his reflections, de la Peña underscored the power of storytelling to transcend linguistic and belief barriers. He views his work as exploring human experiences, prioritizing authenticity and character depth over conforming to rigid linguistic or ideological standards.

Table 13

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with de la Peña for Research Question

Three

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Focus on character development	Throughout his reflections, de la Peña underscored the power of storytelling to transcend linguistic and belief barriers. He views his work as exploring human experiences, prioritizing authenticity and character depth over conforming to rigid linguistic or ideological standards.	Authorial Intent and Character Focus
Prioritizing authenticity over norms	Throughout his reflections, de la Peña underscored the power of storytelling to transcend linguistic and belief barriers. He views his work as exploring human experiences, prioritizing authenticity and character depth over conforming to rigid linguistic or ideological standards.	Authorial Intent and Character Focus
Transcending belief barriers	Throughout his reflections, de la Peña underscored the power of storytelling to transcend linguistic and belief barriers. He views his work as exploring human experiences, prioritizing authenticity and character depth over conforming to rigid linguistic or ideological standards.	Authorial Intent and Character Focus
Polarizing nature of language	Critics have questioned his linguistic choices, framing them as divergent from traditional educational approaches aimed at children. He recounted receiving emails from individuals expressing sentiments such as, "We spend all our time trying to teach kids to speak proper English, and a book like this comes along."	Language Representation

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Critique on linguistic choices	Critics have questioned his linguistic choices, framing them as divergent from traditional educational approaches aimed at children.	Language Representation
Code-switching in narrative	He highlights C.J.'s ability to adapt his speech based on context, suggesting a fluidity in language usage that extends beyond rigid norms. "Also, a kid like C.J., he knows how to code-switch," de la Peña remarked, resolute that his narrative choices reflect real life.	Language Representation
Representation of home languages	de la Peña's use of non-standard English vernacular also demonstrates a truth that many children (and adults) speak in home languages rarely represented in children's picture books. As such, de la Peña's book may provide a unique opportunity for children to see their home language portrayed in a picture book or allow other children to experience the depiction of a different vernacular.	Cultural and Linguistic Diversity
Religious portrayal inquiries	de la Peña also encountered questions from readers regarding his portrayal of religious elements, particularly the Church.	Religious Portrayal
Secular viewpoint considered	Despite acknowledging this viewpoint, he emphasized that his focus remained on character development rather than ideological agendas.	Religious Portrayal
Scope of religious elements	Some questioned whether this specificity made the story too narrow in scope. Reflecting on these inquiries, de la Peña recognized the secular progressive viewpoint, suggesting moving beyond religious literature references.	Religious Portrayal

Reem Faruqi: Muslim-themed Picture Book

Reem Faruqi's book, *Lailah's Lunchbox*, is widely embraced, serving as both an educational tool in public schools and a means of cultural representation. Its resonance

extends beyond its initial publication in 2015, with Faruqi expressing delight in receiving pictures and posts from teachers and librarians during Ramadan. This book's continued praise and engagement attests to its continued relevance in fostering understanding of the holy month in the Muslim tradition.

As a Muslim writer, Faruqi navigates nuanced expectations and pressures, which is evident in middle-grade literature. She acknowledged scrutiny from within the Muslim community,

Some Muslim reviewers can expect your characters to be very well-behaved. That's not the case with children. We're human. I think in that way, I'm never going to write about a perfect character. My characters will usually have a character flaw, and I think if someone expects that type of book, they won't find it with me. For the most part, Muslims are all very different people, and we all practice our faith differently, just like any other faith. You'll see that Muslims have different types of behaviors, too. In my books, the Muslims that you might read about might reflect my experiences.

While *Lailah's Lunchbox* has garnered praise, it has not been without controversy. Faruqi recounts the book's banning in Florida and highlights the challenges of publishing and disseminating diverse literature in overcoming censorship and misconceptions.

In summary, *Lailah's Lunchbox* is admired for bridging cultural gaps and offering representation while acknowledging marginalized voices' complexities and challenges in literature. Faruqi's work is a testament to storytelling's power in fostering empathy and understanding across diverse communities.

Table 14*Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Faruqi for Research Question**Three*

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Public reception	<i>Lailah's Lunchbox</i> is widely embraced, serving as both an educational tool in public schools and a means of cultural representation.	Positive Reception and Cultural Representation
Cultural representation	Its resonance extends beyond its initial publication in 2015, with Faruqi expressing delight in receiving pictures and posts from teachers and librarians during Ramadan.	Positive Reception and Cultural Representation
Representation's impact	In summary, <i>Lailah's Lunchbox</i> is admired for bridging cultural gaps and offering representation while acknowledging marginalized voices' complexities and challenges in literature.	Impact of Representation on Understanding
Author's feelings	As a Muslim writer, Faruqi navigated nuanced expectations and pressures, which is evident in middle-grade literature.	Author's Negotiation of Expectations
Muslim community pressure	She acknowledges scrutiny from within the Muslim community.	Author's Negotiation of Expectations
Character representation	My characters will usually have a character flaw, and I think if someone expects that type of book, they won't find it with me.	Diversity in Character Representation
Diversity in faith	For the most part, Muslims are all very different people, and we all practice our faith differently, just like any other faith.	Diversity in Character Representation
Controversy	Faruqi recounts the book's banning in Florida and highlights the challenges of publishing and disseminating diverse literature in overcoming censorship and misconceptions.	Challenges in Publishing and Controversy
Challenges in publishing	Faruqi recounts the book's banning in Florida and highlights the challenges of publishing and disseminating diverse literature in overcoming censorship and misconceptions.	Challenges in Publishing and Controversy

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Public reception	<i>Lailah's Lunchbox</i> is widely embraced, serving as both an educational tool in public schools and a means of cultural representation.	Positive Reception and Cultural Representation

Amy Hest: Jewish-themed Picture Book

In examining the perceptions surrounding her book *The Friday Nights of Nana*, Amy Hest's narrative reveals a nuanced perspective. Hest's catalog of work consistently receives acclaim within and outside the Jewish community. Indeed, *The Friday Nights of Nana* is featured on the Jewish Book Council's webpage, further underscoring its resonance within the Jewish community. Despite the recognition of her work by Jewish organizations and individuals, Hest does not feel her work is expected to represent the Jewish community. Instead, she expresses a sense of discomfort at the notion of being seen this way. As she explained, "I don't feel that. I would feel put upon, I think, if I were representing any group. That would make me very nervous." Hest articulated her creative process as organic, emphasizing that her characters are inherently Jewish because of her background and experiences. She elucidated, "I just have to write what I write, and the people in my books are Jewish." This authenticity shines through her storytelling, exemplified by another book, *The Summer We Found the Baby*, in which Jewish themes are interwoven throughout the narrative.

Although her books attract attention from Jewish organizations due to their religious and cultural context, Hest underscores that her writing springs from what she knows best rather than a deliberate attempt at representation. She does not perceive herself as deliberately catering to any specific group; instead, she writes from her own

lived experiences and connections that happen to be Jewish. The positive feedback Hest receives validates her ability to authentically capture the essence of Jewish life and culture in her storytelling.

Table 15

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Hest for Research Question Three

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Jewish community acclaim	Hest's catalog of work consistently receives acclaim within and outside the Jewish community.	Community recognition and support
Authenticity in storytelling	This authenticity shines through her storytelling, exemplified by another book, <i>The Summer We Found the Baby</i> , in which Jewish themes are interwoven throughout the narrative.	Authenticity in storytelling
Discomfort with representation	Instead, she expressed a sense of discomfort at the notion of being seen as such.	Authorial discomfort with representation
Organic creative process	Hest articulated her creative process as organic, emphasizing that her characters are inherently Jewish because of her background and experiences.	Organic expression of identity
Writing from lived experiences	She does not perceive herself as deliberately catering to any specific group; instead, she writes from her own lived experiences and connections that happen to be Jewish.	Writing from personal experience

Simran Jeet Singh, Sikh-themed Picture Book

Simran Jeet Singh reflected on the overwhelmingly positive reception of his book *Fauja Singh Keeps Going*. He noted the absence of negative feedback, expressing gratitude for the diverse readership that embraced his work, including children, classrooms, Sikh and South Asian parents, and unexpected audiences such as runners.

Singh explained, "Many runners liked the book, which I was hoping for, but I didn't know if they would find their way to the book and appreciate it."

For Singh, some of the most touching responses came from individuals living with disabilities or those with loved ones facing challenges who wrote, "This is such a good humanizing representation of what our lives are." Reflecting on avoiding dehumanization in storytelling, Singh highlighted the importance of not limiting people to what they can or cannot do. To a great degree, Singh attributed the book's positive feedback to his decision to hire a sensitivity reader to ensure a respectful depiction of disability-related themes. This experience humbled him and reinforced the value of diverse perspectives in storytelling.

Regarding his role as a representative of the Sikh community, Singh expressed discomfort, stating, "I think, ultimately, this question of becoming a default representative of the community is an argument or commentary on the need for more opportunities, writers, stories, and books that show our communities' richness and complexity." Indeed, although readers of Singh's work are exposed to representations of potentially new ideas and experiences, he also calls for more diverse voices to write children's picture books that depict many diverse walks of life and identity.

Table 16

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Singh for Research Question Three

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Positive Reception	He noted the absence of negative feedback, expressing gratitude for the diverse readership that embraced his work.	Positive Reception and Diverse Readership

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Diverse Readership	Including children, classrooms, Sikh and South Asian parents, and unexpected audiences such as runners.	Positive Reception and Diverse Readership
Unexpected Audiences	Many runners liked the book, which I was hoping for, but I didn't know if they would find their way to the book and appreciate it.	Positive Reception and Diverse Readership
Touching Responses	Some of the most touching responses came from individuals living with disabilities or those with loved ones facing challenges.	Positive Reception and Diverse Readership
Humanizing Representation	"This is such a good humanizing representation of what our lives are."	Impactful Representation
Avoiding Dehumanization	Reflecting on avoiding dehumanization in storytelling.	Impactful Representation
Sensitivity Reader	Singh attributed the book's positive feedback to his decision to hire a sensitivity reader.	Impactful Representation
Importance of Diverse Perspectives	Reinforced the value of diverse perspectives in storytelling.	Impactful Representation
Discomfort as Representative	Singh expressed discomfort as a representative of the Sikh community.	Author's Discomfort as Representative
Pressure to Represent Community	Commentary on the need for more opportunities, writers, stories, and books that show our communities' richness and complexity.	Author's Discomfort as Representative

Gita Varadarajan: Hindu-themed Picture Book

In examining Varadarajan's perception of the reception of her book, *My Bindi*, and the perception of representing the Hindu community, several relevant excerpts emerge. First, Varadarajan emphasized the limited scope of her book's representation,

I want to state that this is just the story of one family. It does not represent every single Hindu or every single Indian family that is living in the United States. Not every single kid is going through these questions or feelings. So, I don't think I can represent an entire culture. I cannot represent an entire religion. I'm just representing Divya and her story.

Regarding the book's reception within the Hindu and broader Indian communities, Varadarajan shared anecdotes of positive feedback she received via email and comments on Amazon.com. She mentioned readers who expressed pride and resonance with the portrayal of bindi-wearing characters. One reader expressed enthusiasm for bindis as a fashion accessory and a symbol of more profound significance. Varadarajan read another note from one of her readers:

Then there was this parent from Dublin. I thought this was a nice personal note. She says, "We reside in Dublin, Ireland, and recently gifted our daughter with your book My Bindi. Being South Indian, we are used to wearing the bindi despite staying away from our home country. My young daughter, Kithana, who's 11 years old, felt very connected to the character when she read your book. She, too, has long double-sided braids and goes to school with the bindi. She had experienced similar questions about her bindi. This story made her confident to carry her bindi without being shy. Thank you for coming up with a good book."

This example demonstrates the book's empowering effect on children and suggests a positive reception within communities familiar with bindi-wearing traditions globally.

In addressing potential criticisms or pushback, Varadarajan acknowledged differing perspectives about the actions of various characters in her book but defended

these characters' intentions and nuances. For example, she responded to concerns about the portrayal of parental influence on bindi-wearing, clarifying that the mother's guidance was supportive rather than coercive. In addition, she described how an educator thought Mrs. Gonzalez, the teacher in the book, was othering Divya when she asked Divya if she "would like to come up and tell the class about what you are wearing." Varadarajan expressed confidence in her writing choice to have the teacher ask Divya to speak about her bindi. She further explained how she receives validation for her decision to have the teacher extend the invitation to Divya:

When I read the book aloud in schools, I stop there and ask kids, "Do you think what the teacher did was a good thing?" They say, "Yes, because otherwise we would never have learned about the bindi. We would not know what she was wearing." Almost every kid says that.

Varadarajan's responses show appreciation of *My Bindi's* reception within diverse communities and the complexities of representing cultural identity in children's literature.

Table 17

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Varadarajan for Research

Question Three.

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Positive feedback anecdotes	"Regarding the book's reception within the Hindu and broader Indian communities, Varadarajan shared anecdotes of positive feedback."	Diverse Reception
Validation from readers and audience	"Varadarajan explained how she receives validation for her decision to have the teacher extend the invitation to Divya."	Empowerment and Connection
Empowering effect on children	"This example demonstrates the book's empowering effect on children and suggests a positive reception within communities"	Empowerment and Connection

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
	familiar with bindi-wearing traditions across the globe."	
Limited scope representation	"I want to state that this is just the story of one family... I'm just representing Divya and her story."	Representation Challenges
Addressing potential criticisms	"In addressing potential criticisms or pushback, Varadarajan acknowledged differing perspectives about the actions of various characters in her book..."	Addressing Criticisms
Defending character intentions	"...defended the intentions and nuances of these characters."	Addressing Criticisms
Confidence in writing choice	"Varadarajan expressed confidence in her writing choice to have the teacher ask Divya to speak about her bindi."	Addressing Criticisms

Gene Weingarten: Atheist-themed Picture Book

Gene Weingarten expected his book *Me & Dog* would potentially cause controversy and generate public discussion about atheism. Despite his anticipation of controversy and fervent reactions, he humorously admitted, "I essentially received no push back," expressing a mix of surprise and disillusionment at the lack of public response. Weingarten shook his head and recalled an interview with NPR, saying, "When I joked at the end of the NPR interview that I was hoping that interview about the book would spark horror, I meant that." Weingarten's expectations of the book's popularity, as evidenced by sales, were also unmet. He said, "The book sold okay but didn't sell much. I considered at one point sending anonymous letters to Focus on the Family or some religious organizations saying, 'Can you believe this horrible book about atheism has been published?'"

The most intriguing aspect for Weingarten was the unexpected response from readers who failed to recognize the atheistic undertones within the narrative. He recounted receiving emails asserting, "This is not about atheism," revealing a gap between his intended message and the audience's interpretation. Perplexed, he quipped, "They thought it's only about a kid and his dog," illustrating the divergence between his intention and readers' perceptions. Regarding his perception of the book's reception among the atheist community, Weingarten commented, "There's a general exhaustion among atheists at how little their views are considered generally in all areas."

Weingarten's frank introspection reveals the complexity of navigating public reception and the challenge of conveying subtle messages within societal norms and audience perceptions. Indeed, Weingarten's experience is notable because his intended message resonated with his audience differently from the other authors in this study.

Table 18

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Weingarten for Research Question

Three

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Anticipation of controversy	Gene Weingarten expected <i>Me & Dog</i> would potentially cause controversy and generate public discussion about atheism.	Minimal Controversy and Response
Lack of public response	Despite his anticipation of controversy and fervent reactions, he humorously admitted, "I essentially received no push back."	Minimal Controversy and Response
Anticipation of controversy	Weingarten shook his head and recalled an interview with NPR, saying, "When I joked at the end of the NPR interview that I was hoping that interview about the book would spark horror, I meant that."	Minimal Controversy and Response
Lack of public response	Weingarten's expectations of the book's popularity, as evidenced by sales, were also unmet. He said, "The book sold okay but	Minimal Controversy and Response

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
	didn't sell much. I considered at one point sending anonymous letters to Focus on the Family or some religious organizations saying, 'Can you believe this horrible book about atheism has been published?'"	
Author's Anticipation vs. Reality	Weingarten's frank introspection reveals the complexity of navigating public reception and the challenge of conveying subtle messages within societal norms and audience perceptions.	Author's Anticipation vs. Reality
Unexpected response from readers	The most intriguing aspect for Weingarten was the unexpected response from readers who failed to recognize the atheistic undertones within the narrative.	Misinterpretation by Readers
Gap between intended message and interpretation	Perplexed, he quipped, "They thought it's only about a kid and his dog," illustrating the divergence between his intention and readers' perceptions	Misinterpretation by Readers
Gap between intended message and interpretation	Regarding his perception of the book's reception among the atheist community, Weingarten commented, "There's a general exhaustion among atheists at how little their views are considered generally in all areas."	Misinterpretation by Readers

Thematic Category 4: Authors' Responses to Illustrations

The fourth theme to emerge across interviews was the authors' responses to illustrations. Indeed, six authors reported a connection between their own religious identity and the content of their picture book. Interestingly, all of the authors believed that the illustrations enhanced their stories. The collaboration between the author and illustrator was limited, which is typical of children's picture book publishing. The results below describe the emergence of the theme of religious identity in addition to connections and dissimilarities.

Matt de la Peña: Christian-themed Picture Book

Matt de la Peña reflected warmly on Christian Robinson's illustrations in *Last Stop on Market Street*. It is important to note that Robinson won a Caldecott Honor Award for his colorful, playful, and engaging images in the book. His technique was mixed media with acrylic paint and collage. In the children's picture book publishing world, it is rare for authors and illustrators to collaborate or even meet. In de la Peña's case, the two are friends, share an agent, and have published other work together in the past. de la Peña values Robinson's creative freedom, stating, "I try not to leave notes for the illustrator to honor their creativity." However, certain elements, such as the theme of serving others, are crucial. Consequently, de la Peña ensured they were effectively conveyed visually by including notes for the illustrator.

de la Peña shared his views on the interplay between narrative and illustrations in picture books,

The ending is revealed when Nana and C.J. serve in the soup kitchen only through the pictures, not the narrative. That was one request I had for Christian Robinson.

It's like you can turn it up and put it in words, or you can turn it down and just have it visually represented. For me, the best picture books can be entered in different ways, but you can get something out of any of those entry points.

de la Peña acknowledges the different backgrounds between him and Robinson, noting, "When I write the text, I think of my experience, and then it gets in the hands of Christian, who filters it through his experience." This highlights the richness of their diverse, then combined, perspectives in the book.

de la Peña also shares insights into their collaborative dynamic, mentioning subtle adjustments made during the creative process, such as changing the main character's name from D.J. to C.J. based on Robinson's input. Robinson had an uncle named D.J. who got into trouble when he was a kid; due to this connection, Robinson asked if D.J.'s name could be changed. This showed mutual respect and flexibility in their working relationship. Through his fond reflections on collaborating with Christian Robinson, de la Peña provided valuable insights into the creative process behind the illustrations. As de la Peña enthusiastically noted, "Christian definitely represented the story well!"

The most obvious visual representation of Christianity is the cross on the Church from which the main characters, Nana and C.J., start their trip at the beginning of the book. As de la Peña did not explicitly write that Nana and C.J. had been to Church, Christian Robinson's imagery quietly clarified the Christian theme. Robinson depicted the Church as a bright building with stained glass and a welcoming wooden door.

Table 19

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with de la Peña for Research Question

Four

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Caldecott Honor Award	Robinson won a Caldecott Honor Award for his colorful, playful, and engaging images in <i>Last Stop on Market Street</i> .	Collaboration and Creative Freedom
Collaborative relationship	In de la Peña's case, the two are friends, share an agent, and have published other work together in the past.	Collaboration and Creative Freedom
Creative freedom	de la Peña values Robinson's creative freedom, stating, "I try not to leave notes for the illustrator to honor their creativity."	Collaboration and Creative Freedom
Diverse perspectives	When I write the text, I think of my experience, and then it gets in the hands of	Sensitivity to Community Representation

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
	Christian, who filters it through his experience.	
Character name change	Changing the main character's name from D.J. to C.J. based on Robinson's input.	Sensitivity to Community Representation
Serving others visually	The ending is revealed when Nana and C.J. serve in the soup kitchen only through the pictures, not the narrative.	Visual Representation of Themes
Narrative vs. visuals	It's like you can turn it up and put it in words, or you can turn it down and just have it visually represented.	Visual Representation of Themes
Representing Christianity visually	Christian Robinson's imagery quietly clarified the Christian theme.	Visual Representation of Themes

Reem Faruqi: Muslim-themed Picture Book

Reem Faruqi reflected on Lea Lyon's illustrations in *Lailah's Lunchbox* and appreciated Lyon's authentic representation of the Muslim narrative. When asked about Lyon's role as a white Jewish illustrator, Faruqi responded with admiration, noting Lyon's dedication to accurately portraying a Muslim family's life. She acknowledged Lyon's visit to the home of personal Muslim friends, who had a daughter whom Lyon used as a model for the illustrations. Faruqi sent pictures of her home to Lyon. Faruqi explained,

Yes, she did a really great job. She dedicated the art to the Muslim girl, Eshal. She based the illustrations on a real family and fifth-grade class in San Ramon, California. You see the girl's mom and dad and her class. I sent her photos of my house. The spice jars on the first page spread look like the ones in my kitchen. She used a lot of details from me.

Faruqi underscored Lyon's attention to detail, such as including Islamic art motifs in page borders, demonstrating Lyon's commitment to authenticity. Faruqi's affirmation that Lyon successfully translated photographs into art highlighted Lyon's skill in capturing the essence of the Muslim family's life. Faruqi expressed enthusiasm for Lyon's research-driven approach, praising her use of watercolors (Faruqi had requested watercolor illustrations) and her overall visual representation based on her meticulous research.

When questioned about the motif on Lailah's lunchbox, Faruqi viewed it as a delightful addition and described it as a "blinged-out" lunchbox without explicitly associating it with Muslim culture. Instead, she suggested it could be reminiscent of Pakistani aesthetics but ultimately interpreted it as a fun, colorful accessory for a young girl.

In summary, Faruqi perceived Lyon's illustrations as a respectful and accurate portrayal of the Muslim narrative in *Lailah's Lunchbox* and praised Lyon's dedication, attention to detail, and research-driven approach to bringing the story to life.

Table 20

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Faruqi for Research Question Four

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Authentic representation	Reem Faruqi reflected on Lea Lyon's illustrations in <i>Lailah's Lunchbox</i> and appreciated Lyon's authentic representation of the Muslim narrative.	Illustrative Authenticity
Based on real family	Yes, she did a great job. She dedicated the art to the Muslim girl, Eshal. She based the illustrations on a real family and fifth-grade class in San Ramon, California.	Illustrative Authenticity
Attention to Islamic motifs	Faruqi underscored Lyon's attention to detail, such as including Islamic art motifs in page	Illustrative Authenticity

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
	borders, demonstrating Lyon's commitment to authenticity.	
Pressure to represent community	In summary, Faruqi perceived Lyon's illustrations as a respectful and accurate portrayal of the Muslim narrative in <i>Lailah's Lunchbox</i> and praised Lyon's dedication, attention to detail, and research-driven approach to bringing the story to life.	Community Representation
Dedication to portrayal	Faruqi responded with admiration, noting Lyon's dedication to accurately portraying a Muslim family's life.	Artistic Dedication
Skill in capturing essence	Faruqi's affirmation that Lyon successfully translated photographs into art highlighted Lyon's skill in capturing the essence of the Muslim family's life.	Artistic Dedication
Research-driven approach	Faruqi expressed enthusiasm for Lyon's research-driven approach, praising her use of watercolors and her overall visual representation based on her meticulous research.	Artistic Dedication
Use of watercolors	Faruqi expressed enthusiasm for Lyon's research-driven approach, praising her use of watercolors (Faruqi had requested watercolor illustrations) and her overall visual representation based on her meticulous research.	Artistic Dedication
Interpretation of lunchbox	When questioned about the motif on Lailah's lunchbox, Faruqi viewed it as a delightful addition and described it as a "blinged-out" lunchbox without explicitly associating it with Muslim culture.	Cultural Sensitivity
Fun, colorful accessory	Instead, she suggested it could be reminiscent of Pakistani aesthetics but ultimately interpreted it as a fun, colorful accessory for a young girl.	Cultural Sensitivity

Amy Hest: Jewish-themed Picture Book

In discussing Amy Hest's perception of Claire A. Nivola's illustrations in *The Friday Nights of Nana*, it was evident that Hest deeply appreciates the book's visual elements.

Hest's sentiments are conveyed through her statements: "I love the illustrations. They're painterly and beautiful. They're not especially childlike, and I like that. They're very dignified."

Hest's observation regarding the emotional depth conveyed through the illustrations underscores their significance: "What spoke to me was the coziness of it more than the religious symbols. She made the book look like this was a special occasion for Jennie. I like that. I like that." Here, Hest emphasizes the illustrator's skill in capturing the emotional essence of the narrative, particularly in portraying moments of intimacy and sacred rituals.

Moreover, Hest's reflection on the lasting impact of the illustrations on readers further emphasized their significance: "You know there is something special from watching Nana and Jennie's interactions. It feels like a memory. When that little girl grows up, she will remember this." This statement highlights Hest's recognition of the illustrations' ability to evoke nostalgia and create enduring impressions, suggesting their importance in shaping readers' connections and emotions.

The interviewer noted the intricate details and vibrant quality of Nivola's illustrations. Claire A. Nivola's vivid images were done in intricate drawings, and she appears to have added color with either acrylics or gouache. The graphics are highly

detailed and include bright, rich colors and texture. Meticulous craftsmanship and artistic skill are evident in Nivola's work and contribute to the book's visual impact.

In addition, Nivola pays homage to other artists, such as Henri Matisse, by including similar works on the walls of Nana's apartment. Religious images include an Orthodox Jewish family walking around the corner while Nana and Jennie shop for flowers. All of the men wear yarmulkes at the dinner table.

As the interviewer, I was surprised by the absence of one particular image and noted that Nana did not wear a head covering when she lit the Shabbat candles and whispered prayers—this is a ritual that Amy Hest maintains today because it is something her grandmother always did. Although this was not discussed during the interview, I wondered if Hest would have valued that representation.

A multifaceted understanding emerges in synthesizing Hest's perspective with the interviewer's observations, highlighting Nivola's illustrations' aesthetic qualities, thematic richness, intertextual references, and cultural significance. Together, these elements contribute to the nuanced portrayal of familial rituals and emotional experiences depicted in *The Friday Nights of Nana*, enriching the reader's engagement with the text.

Table 21

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Hest for Research Question Four.

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Painterly and beautiful	"I love the illustrations. They're painterly and beautiful."	Aesthetic Excellence
Intricate and vibrant	"Claire A. Nivola's vibrant images were done in intricate drawings."	Aesthetic Excellence
Emotional depth and coziness	"What spoke to me was the coziness of it more than the religious symbols."	Emotional Resonance
Lasting impact on readers	"You know there is something special from watching Nana and Jennie's interactions."	Emotional Resonance

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Homage to other artists	"In addition, Nivola pays homage to other artists, such as Henri Matisse."	Cultural Representation
Absence of head covering	"I was surprised by the absence of one particular image and noted that Nana did not wear a head covering when she lit the Shabbat candles and whispered prayers."	Cultural Representation
Pressure to represent	"Although this was not discussed during the interview, I wondered if Hest would have valued that representation."	Community Representation
Nuanced portrayal of familial	"Together, these elements contribute to the nuanced portrayal of familial rituals and emotional experiences depicted in <i>The Friday Nights of Nana</i> ."	Nuanced Portrayal

Simran Jeet Singh: Sikh-themed Picture Book

In discussing Simran Jeet Singh's perception of Baljinder Kaur's illustrations in *Fauja Singh Keeps Going*, it became evident that he viewed Kaur's work with deep admiration and appreciation. From his perspective, Kaur's background and expertise aligned perfectly with the essence of the story and created a symbiotic relationship between the text and the visuals. For example, Kaur juxtaposed illustrations, notably between the boy having his hair combed and later showing Fauja Singh combing his hair with a kangha and wrapping his turban as an older man. These contrasting images highlight the continuity of rituals and the passage of time. Kaur's expert illustrations are likely informed by her cultural and ethnic ties to Punjabi traditions and practices.

Singh expressed his enthusiasm for Kaur's representation, stating, "Oh, I was thrilled with how Baljinder Kaur represented the book. She was the perfect person to tell the story." This sentiment reflected genuine satisfaction with Kaur's ability to capture the essence of Singh's narrative, rooted in Sikh, Punjabi, and British cultures. Moreover,

Singh emphasized the significance of Kaur's cultural insight, noting, "To have someone who understands the nuances of Punjabi culture; that was really special." He recognized Kaur's attention to detail, particularly in her portrayal of everyday experiences that resonate deeply within Sikh communities, such as the tender moment of a mother combing her son's hair with a kangha, a small wooden comb. One of Singh's favorite illustrations depicts this very scene, in which a young Faujah is having his hair combed by his mother. He relates to it personally, stating, "I loved that page because that's exactly how I used to have my hair combed growing up." This intimate connection illustrates Kaur's ability to evoke sentimentality within the reader while bridging cultural boundaries for readers who may be unfamiliar with this cultural practice.

Singh's praise extended to Kaur's meticulous representation of Sikh identity, from clothing styles to traditional grooming practices. He remarked, "I've seen so many attempts to illustrate how Sikhs look in ways that make me cringe, and this book was right on point in all of these aspects." This acknowledgment underscored Singh's profound satisfaction with Kaur's ability to capture the authenticity of Sikh culture visually.

In summary, Singh's perspective on Baljinder Kaur's illustrations in *Fauja Singh Keeps Going* is one of admiration and gratitude. Through her artistry, Kaur enhanced the story and honored the rich tapestry of Sikh and Punjabi heritage, creating a visual narrative that resonates with readers. As Singh succinctly concluded, "I love the art. I don't have a negative thing to say about any of it."

Table 22

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Singh for Research Question Four

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Essence of narrative captured	Singh's perspective on Kaur's illustrations in Fauja Singh Keeps Going is one of admiration and gratitude.	Cultural Authenticity and Representation
Meticulous representation of Sikh identity	Kaur's background and expertise aligned perfectly with the essence of the story.	Cultural Authenticity and Representation
Authenticity of Sikh culture visually	Contrasting images highlight the continuity of rituals and the passage of time.	Cultural Authenticity and Representation
Honoring Sikh and Punjabi heritage	Kaur's expert illustrations are likely informed by her cultural and ethnic ties to Punjabi traditions.	Cultural Authenticity and Representation
Bridging cultural boundaries	Singh expressed his enthusiasm for Kaur's representation.	Bridging Cultural Boundaries, Emotional Connection and Resonance
Emotional Connection and Resonance	Genuine satisfaction with Kaur's ability to capture the essence of Singh's narrative.	Emotional Connection and Resonance
Resonance with readers	Singh praised Kaur's meticulous representation of Sikh identity.	Emotional Connection and Resonance, Cultural Authenticity and Representation

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Pressure for Authentic Representation	Singh acknowledged Kaur's ability to capture the authenticity of Sikh culture visually.	Pressure for Authentic Representation, Cultural Authenticity and Representation

Gita Varadarajan: Hindu-themed Picture Book

Varadarajan's comments about Archana Sreenivasan's illustrations in *My Bindi* were appreciative and specific, reflecting her own immigrant experience: "I could not be more pleased with how Archana Sreenivasan supported the narrative with her illustrations." Sreenivasan's meticulous attention to detail, evident in the portrayal of cultural artifacts, received particular praise from Varadarajan: "Archana Sreenivasan added these little objects everywhere that bring out who this family is."

Sreenivasan's illustrations were drawn with pencil and then digitally scanned and colorized. The bright and vivid images capture the essence of Divya's family as recent immigrants, emphasizing their vibrant Indian identity through mementos from home, such as a Tanjore doll and bindi box. Varadarajan stressed that the family is not Indian-American, but rather, they are recent immigrants, which is reflected in their ties to Indian culture. As she noted, "Some readers assume that Divya's family is Indian-American, but they are not." Drawing parallels to her own experience, Varadarajan reflected on the significance of these cultural artifacts that maintain ties to one's past while navigating a new life in a different country. She explained, "When I moved to the United States from India, I brought my entire home here. Every painting, small little artifact; everything that

would remind me of my life back home I brought here because I wanted to hold onto my identity."

Indian and Hindu symbols exemplify the family's cultural identity, offering powerful cues about their roots. As Varadarajan pointed out, "Archana Sreenivasan included jasmine flowers and Ganesh, the elephant god." She continued,

On each page, Archana added details like the little magnet on the fridge with the Taj Mahal, the fabric on the cushion covers with Indian designs, the bed cover, which is also from India, and a little parrot right next to Divya's bed. Archana added all of this to bring out who this family is.

Varadarajan highlighted how some readers may overlook these details, leading to misconceptions about the family's background. However, Sreenivasan's illustrations offer cultural signifiers which illuminate the family's immigrant experience for those who read and look closely. It is also possible that readers familiar with these symbols may be more likely to notice and interpret them as signs of the family's identity.

With appreciation for her artistry and depictions, Varadarajan perceived Sreenivasan's illustrations as critical components in conveying the identity of Divya's family as Indian immigrants moving through the complexities of adaptation while preserving their heritage in the United States.

Table 23*Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Varadarajan for Research**Question Four*

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Cultural artifacts detail	"Archana Sreenivasan added these little objects everywhere that bring out who this family is."	Cultural Representation
Vibrant Indian identity	"The bright and vivid images capture the essence of Divya's family as recent immigrants..."	Cultural Representation
Indian and Hindu symbols	"Archana Sreenivasan included jasmine flowers and Ganesh, the elephant god."	Cultural Representation
Cultural signifiers	"Sreenivasan's illustrations offer cultural signifiers which illuminate the family's immigrant experience..."	Cultural Representation
Reflection on cultural artifacts	"When I moved to the United States from India, I brought my entire home here..."	Immigrant Experience
Identity preservation	"...preserving their heritage in the United States."	Immigrant Experience
Complexities of adaptation	"...moving through the complexities of adaptation while preserving their heritage in the United States."	Immigrant Experience
Pressure to represent community	"Some readers assume that Divya's family is Indian-American, but they are not."	Authorial Intent

Gene Weingarten: Atheist

In delving into Gene Weingarten's perception of Eric Shansby's illustrations in the book *Me & Dog*, it was evident that Weingarten approached the topic with his characteristic humor. Weingarten collaborated closely with Shansby for numerous years

at the *Washington Post*, and his assessment of Shansby's work conveyed professional familiarity and personal admiration.

Weingarten's assessment of Shansby's illustrations in *Me & Dog* was one of praise that included playful criticism. He commended Shansby's overall work: "I think Eric Shansby did a wonderful job on the book." However, Weingarten jested that it "took him a little too long." It was a teasing nod to Shansby's creative process or perhaps an inside joke between the two friends.

One aspect of Shansby's illustrations that Weingarten highlighted was breaking a "major barrier in the illustrative arts." Weingarten asked Shansby to include an anatomical depiction of the dog's anus, or as Weingarten dubbed it, a "canus." "Shansby liked the idea and included it gleefully. This artistic decision, while seemingly trivial, represented a significant departure from conventional illustration norms in children's books, signaling a bold move towards portraying a more unfiltered reality. Weingarten said, "You're not going to see Snoopy's anus even though dogs have one there because everything is sanitized for you. As silly as this sounds, even that was a message in this book." Weingarten's praise for the anatomically accurate depiction of a dog fits with his overall orientation of providing child readers with alternate ways to view the world.

In discussing specific illustrations, Weingarten pointed to a double-page spread featuring Sid, the central character, positioned as the sun while planets orbited around him, accompanied by the dog. The child-friendly text that builds up to, and into this spread is:

Murphy's pretty smart, but he thinks a bit too much of me.

To him, I'm not a short grade-schooler.

I'm supreme Almighty Ruler.

Super-duper

boss

and king

of absolutely

everything.

Weingarten praised this particular image for its ability to represent the essence of his intended message, as the dog views Sid as a god-like figure. This illustration exemplifies Shansby's ability to visually communicate Weingarten's intended concept for the book.

Weingarten admired Shansby's artistic skill and his integration of uncustomary visual elements that enhanced the book's narrative and thematic depth. Through humor and insight, Weingarten offered an interpretation which emphasized Shansby's contributions to the illustrative arts and storytelling.

Table 24

Codes, Excerpts, and Themes from the Interview with Weingarten for Research Question Four

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Providing alternate perspectives	"Weingarten's assessment of Shansby's illustrations in <i>Me & Dog</i> was one of praise that included playful criticism."	Alternative perspectives and representation
Symbolism of Sid as a god-like figure	"Weingarten praised this particular image for its ability to represent the essence of his intended message, as the dog views Sid as a god-like figure."	Alternative perspectives and representation

Codes	Excerpts	Themes
Breaking illustrative norms	One aspect of Shansby's illustrations that Weingarten highlighted was breaking a 'major barrier in the illustrative arts.'	Artistic innovation and boldness
Anatomically accurate depiction	"Weingarten's praise for the anatomically accurate depiction of a dog fits with his overall orientation of providing child readers with alternate ways to view the world."	Artistic innovation and boldness
Integration of uncustomary visual elements	"Weingarten admired Shansby's artistic skill and his integration of uncustomary visual elements that enhanced the book's narrative and thematic depth."	Artistic innovation and boldness
Professional familiarity and admiration	"Weingarten collaborated closely with Shansby for numerous years at the Washington Post, and his assessment of Shansby's work conveyed professional familiarity and personal admiration."	Collaborative creativity and professionalism
Playful criticism	"It was a teasing nod to Shansby's creative process or perhaps an inside joke between the two friends."	Collaborative creativity and professionalism
Visually communicating intended concept	"This illustration exemplifies Shansby's ability to visually communicate Weingarten's intended concept for the book."	Collaborative creativity and professionalism

Summary

This chapter provided answers to the following research questions: "In the 21st century, what are the human experiences of those who are writing and illustrating children's picture books that include themes of religious and spiritual identity?" and "Why did the authors choose to write about religion or spirituality?". These questions were answered via interviews with six authors of various spiritual and religious identities, including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and atheist beliefs. Results were

organized by research question and interviewee, allowing for the analysis of each participant's lived experience and perspective regarding their work.

Regarding research question one, participants discussed themes related to lived religious and spiritual backgrounds and journeys. Regarding research question two, participants also discussed the following themes related to crafting and storytelling, including themes of religion, spirituality, and atheistic beliefs, often through the lens of mirrors, windows, and doors. Interviews and analysis revealed several findings that require further discussion. Chapter 5 included additional interpretations of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions and placed these findings in the context of prior research literature and theory. In addition, Chapter 5 included a discussion regarding the limitations and implications of the current study and recommendations for future research in this area.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

This discussion integrates the current study's findings regarding how authors of children's picture books weave religious and spiritual themes into their narratives. This qualitative inquiry explored the personal catalysts and aspirations guiding authors in their composition of picture books and their backgrounds and perceptions of religion and spirituality in children's picture books. The study findings highlight the nuanced ways illustrators depict religious and spiritual identities, thus making a distinct contribution to the scholarship in the field of children's literacy. Importantly, the findings underscore the role of authors' personal backgrounds and deliberate experiences in crafting genuine portrayals of religious and spiritual elements, as contrasted with interpretations imposed by others. Emphasizing spiritual and religious identities within children's literature is crucial, encompassing a broader ambit of diversity and inclusion (Bishop, 1990). Therefore, this study broadens the current academic discourse by exploring the personal stories of children's authors related to spirituality and religion, illustrating the complex interplay between their creative intent, the depiction of multifaceted identities, and their identities.

Interpretation of Results

Several of the themes identified, including "family teachings and practices" and "religious upbringing," highlight how authors frequently draw inspiration from their own experiences as children and family members or those they have witnessed to shape their stories. Indeed, all the authors cited their own experiences as motivation for including spiritual or religious themes in their picture books. For example, author Matt de la Peña discussed at length the strong Catholic beliefs of his grandmother and his mother's more

private faith, kept hidden due to the atheistic beliefs of de la Peña's father. This blend of beliefs from key family members helped form Peña's own spirituality, which is not linked to any specific branch of Christianity. Nonetheless, his book, *Last Stop on Market Street*, clearly reflects Christian themes, most notably through the symbolism of the Cross at the church where the story begins. Another author, Amy Hest, also cited her experiences growing up in a Jewish family as pivotal in developing her identity as a writer who tells stories with Jewish themes. For Hest, her close family ties and regular visits to her synagogue deeply influence her storytelling. Hest reflected that in every book she writes, she can see parts of herself in at least one of the characters. Meanwhile, being raised by a strict Hindu grandmother and attending an Irish Catholic School in India critically shaped author Gita Varadarajan's religious journey with criticality and also influenced her decision to include Hindu themes in her book *My Bindi* to educate and empower children of all faiths. Like Varadarajan, Simran Jeet Singh was influenced by the lack of Sikh picture book representation in his home of rural Texas and his parents' dedication to passing down Sikh customs and beliefs to their children. As a young boy, Singh aspired to write a mainstream book that included the Sikh characters and culture that was absent from his childhood. Similar to Varadarajan, Singh sought to provide representation in his picture books of identities he did not see growing up. In a similar manner to Singh and Hest, author Reem Faruqi's connection to her religious practice gives her writing a distinct voice. Faruqi's inclusion of Muslim themes and identities in her work reflects her own lived experience that Muslim children are exposed to Islam and Islamic representation from an early age.

Although his upbringing and religion of ancestry also influenced author Gene Weingarten, his experience of including religion in his picture books deviated from that of his colleagues. Specifically, although Weingarten views himself as "culturally Jewish" based on his family background, he identifies as an atheist. He attributes this to the absence of his religious upbringing and his evolution of religious criticality based on science. Weingarten's ponderings about a higher power are told through a boy named Sid in his book *Me and Dog*. Whereas his colleagues aspired to provide additional representations of their own religious identities in children's picture books, Weingarten sought to provide additional representation of individuals without a specific religious or spiritual tradition. Notably, this particular theme did not emerge in other books.

Other themes emerged regarding spirituality and its relationship with different aspects of identity and experience, including "hope transcending religious doctrines" and "spirituality shaped by experiences." These themes indicate that some authors hold universal values beyond specific religious teachings. "Spirituality without formal beliefs" and "innate spirituality in childhood" also reflect an understanding that spirituality can be an intrinsic part of the human experience, independent of structured religion. These ideas were clearly expressed by de la Peña when he shared that "his spiritual outlook emerged organically and was shaped by life experiences rather than explicit teachings." For de la Peña, "Hope is an ever-present guiding light, a source of strength that transcends specific religious boundaries." Upon reviewing the findings, I wish I had asked de la Peña if he has a "Golden Rule" philosophy, a set of tenets that bridge spiritual ascriptions and religious doctrines. Future researchers may consider specifically exploring the extent to

which children's picture book authors ascribe to and communicate spiritual transcendence in their work.

Notably, all of the authors were enthusiastic about study participation, and they viewed the project as important work that could lead to a greater understanding of different religions, belief systems, and cultures. The authors were willing to share personal vulnerabilities during interviews. Regarding "questioning religious practices" and "moments of doubt and introspection," the authors did not shy away from exploring complex, frequently challenging aspects of religious and spiritual experiences. For example, Singh stated he had experienced religious doubts, but

...not as deeply as other people in my family or other people I know in religious communities, but I had big questions. From childhood, I tried to make sense of this tradition; some of that came as I was comparing Sikhism to other religions and saying, "Oh, Christianity has these ideas; why don't we have these ideas?" or, "This tradition does something that makes sense to me, why don't we do something similar?" I had those kinds of doubts. I don't think I've ever really been in a place where I've doubted the existence of divinity; that's always felt true to me. I haven't doubted the practical relevance of Sikh teachings. The way that I was raised to understand Sikh philosophy was always: how do you apply this to your daily life? I wouldn't say that I've had any crisis of faith. At the same time, I can say, like anyone else, there are times when I feel more connected to the tradition. That's also true.

On the other hand, when Hest was asked about doubts, her answer was firmly absolute, "Never. It's been a constant. I am Jewish. It's who I am. While I don't study the Torah, I

am Jewish from head to toe." These answers illustrate a diversity of experiences and opinions among authors regarding the role and impact of religious doubt. Despite the diversity of opinion regarding doubt among the authors, Weingarten's work was the only one to explicitly address themes of religious doubt and questioning. Future research may explore the depiction of religious doubt in children's picture books and the impact of authors' doubt on their work.

For Faruqi, her passion and dedication to her faith and the representation of her identity are perhaps most evident when discussing religious doubt. Specifically, when asked about her questioning of her Muslim faith, Faruqi answered:

I would assume maybe everybody does at some point when it's harder to practice your faith, or maybe nobody does. I don't know. I think, at some point, it can be easy to question one's faith. I felt like I questioned it more when I moved here [to the United States] as opposed to when I lived in a Muslim country because, in a Muslim country where people are primarily Muslim, I think Ramadan, for example, not everyone, but the majority of people are fasting in Ramadan, in say Abu Dhabi or my country Pakistan. When I moved to America, I was like the only kid maybe in the whole school who might not be eating lunch. Yes, at that point, when you're watching your friend eat a delicious sandwich or french fries, you're questioning yourself. You're like, "I could eat a french fry, and nobody would really care." I think that could be a time when you question yourself or say, if I wear hijab and nobody else was wearing hijab, that can be a time when you might think, "Is this really necessary?" Then you sort of drop upon your own faith and say, "Well, this is important to me." Yes, there have been times like such as those.

Faruqi's account of the push and pull between her lived juxtaposition of American culture and Pakistani Muslim culture reads authentically through the character of Lailah in *Lailah's Lunchbox*. Fearing that her teacher and classmates will not understand why she is fasting, Lailah writes a letter to her teacher that includes the following poem that she shares with her peers:

Ramadan is a month Muslims celebrate.

A time to count our blessings and appreciate.

Muslims fast before sunrise to sunset

But wait, that's not all just yet!

Ramadan is a time for lots of prayer.

We help the poor people to show we care!

So, in the day, I won't be eating any food

But hopefully will stay in a good mood!

The vulnerability Faruqi shared in her interview and the poem she includes in her book are examples of how her lived experiences have shaped a character and a narrative. Faruqi's own experiences of isolation and marginalization and her willingness to vulnerably share those during the interview connect with the feelings held by many who are also othered by or excluded from a dominant culture. Despite the potential resonance of Faruqi's work, this book was one of 176 books banned in Duval County, Florida, based on its focus on religious minorities and Islamic themes. Banning this work reflects the complexities and challenges some authors face when representing diverse characters and themes. Future research is necessary to explore how the lack of access or variable access

to picture books containing such diversity impacts literacy and cultural sensitivity among young readers.

The influence of cultural and familial backgrounds, including immigrant experiences, indicates a desire among picture book authors for more diverse and inclusive representation in children's literature. For example, Varadarajan discusses her character Divya and the overlap between being Hindu and a recent immigrant:

A lot of people think that this is an Indian–American family, and then they make comments that this doesn't happen to Indian–American families; this is not an Indian–American family. They're an Indian immigrant family. They've just immigrated. They're probably living off of a visa. Divya was not born and brought up here. She probably moved here. That's the kind of child I was writing about.

As an adult immigrant, Varadarajan drew upon her lived experiences to empathetically write about the perspectives of both Divya and her mother. She recognized the need to hold on to India through the artifacts she brought. This nuance was essential to her while crafting *My Bindi* because of the lack of religious and immigrant representation in children's picture books.

Singh compared his parents' immigration experience to Fauja Singh's solo move to England. Singh's writing, unlike that of his colleagues, was influenced by his own experiences as a child and the specific experiences of a historical figure. In this manner, Singh provides readers with diverse representation and education about a specific historical figure from the Sikh community. He specifically described the impact of his family's experience as Sikh immigrants to the United States on his childhood identity:

My parents are both Sikhs who immigrated from Punjab in India. We were one of the only Sikh families in South Texas when we were growing up. For my parents, it was very important to preserve the traditions. Growing up at home, we would learn language. I knew Punjabi before I knew English. We learned scripture and daily prayers and would sing all the time. We have a tradition of music and instruments and we learned those from a young age too. So much of the daily Sikh practice that's common around the world was part of our upbringing.

The illustrative elements in children's books also play a crucial role in visually translating and enhancing the authors' narratives about diverse religious and spiritual themes. Detailed cultural and religious artifacts in illustrations add depth and context to the narrative, enabling children to connect more deeply with the material. Faruqi, Singh, and Varadarajan most poignantly noted these details during their interviews. Faruqi was pleased with Lea Lyon's research-based illustrations, which enhanced the narrative and represented a Muslim home and family, as was Varadarajan with Archana Sreenivasan's illustrations, depicting images of similar Hindu backgrounds. Singh was delighted with all of the illustrations. In particular, he expressed a fondness for Baljinder Kaur's depiction of a young Fauja Sing having his hair combed, an image reminiscent of Simran Jeet Singh's own childhood. As discussed below, the interviews exemplified many of the theoretical findings Bishop (1990) detailed regarding the need for diverse literature.

Across the interviews, authors described a desire to see characters who looked like them or practiced their religious or cultural traditions in the picture books they read as children or as part of the literature for children in the present day. The authors' reports are clearly connected with Bishop's (1990) identification of mirrors, windows, and doors.

Indeed, according to Bishop (1990), readers can see themselves reflected in the pages of a book, be the voyeur and look into a new situation, or immerse themselves in the textual experience. However, when children cannot see representations of themselves or their traditions, they may not be able to experience the mirror that Bishop describes. Indeed, the absence of representation may further other or marginalize children who are already overlooked or underrepresented by the dominant culture. In addition, when children's picture books fail to depict diverse identities, children also lose the opportunity to experience windows and doors, as Bishop described. The authors in the current study recognized a dearth in the children's book market and acknowledged that there was a void that they had the authentic experience and motivation to address.

Relationship Between Results and Prior Research

The current study examines the perspectives and lived experiences of children's picture book authors who depict spiritual or religious themes in their work. The topic of this study is critical because although federal instructional guidelines support teaching comparative religion and spirituality in public school settings, the lived experience of the study's authors indicates that religious or spirituality diversity is under-discussed in public school settings and among children. For example, Reem Faruqi was a second-grade teacher who wanted to include books representing diverse student experiences. Nonetheless, few published books were available that represented diverse spiritual or religious cultures and traditions. Public schools in the United States are purported to be places of religious tolerance and inclusivity that do not promote any particular religious faith (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Despite this goal of the U.S. Department of Education, the authors in the current study identified a lack of tolerance and inclusivity in

their own lives. Several created their work with this idealistic goal: to create more inclusive and tolerant children's picture books. This study provides critical background information about the authors and illustrators from which teachers can enrich their lessons.

The critical underpinning of the current study was to explore the lived experiences of children's picture book authors and their motivations when writing their picture books. This study and its findings are a valuable contribution to the current research literature given that contemporary literary theory and current research on children's literary response rarely explore authors' intention for communication with readers. For example, Barthes (1977) identified the "death of the author," asserting that readers can interpret literary texts as they see fit because so little is known about the author's purpose. According to Barthes, there is little utility in examining the lived experience of children's authors. However, this exploration is essential to the study of literature and understanding authors' motivations and experiences. Hirsch (1967), unlike Barthes (1977), distinguished between a literary text's significance and meaning when addressing the author's intent. Specifically, Hirsch argued that a text may have multiple meanings for different readers at different times and locations, but there is only one true meaning: the author's intended meaning (Sipe, 1999). As the interviewer for this qualitative study, it was a privilege to talk with each of these authors, query their thoughts, ask questions about their backgrounds, and delve into their motivations. For example, I learned from Singh the name of the comb used in the illustration and why it is so meaningful to the Sikh culture. The immigrant authors all enlightened me with discussions of being the object of racism, prejudice, and religious intolerance. de la Peña and I discussed the use

of African American vernacular in his book, which added an inclusive element to his work, as well as C. J.'s ability to code switch. Weingarten also discussed his values of goodness, love, and kindness towards animals and humans, and the importance of separating his values from a specific religious or spiritual tradition. These stories and authors' details further illuminated their work's themes and potential impact.

The study and its design were informed by John Dewey's theory of experience (Dewey, 1938; Kim, 2016). According to Dewey (Kim, 2016), experience can be described using various terms, including dynamic, united, communicative, historically significant, and socially oriented. The multiple aspects of experiences are linked via Dewey's (Kim, 2016) concept of togetherness. Specific to the current study, Dewey (Kim, 2016) asserted that experience informs motivation and communication. This theory was reflected in the current study's findings, given that every author in this study cited personal references to familial relationships and experiences in forming their belief systems, whether religious, spiritual, or atheist. In addition, many authors noted their own experiences regarding the lack of representation in children's picture books as motivation for their own work.

It is also clear that Bakhtin's theory of novelness is also linked with the current study (Kim, 2016). In particular, Bakhtin's two points of novelness resonated:

- focus on the significance of the everyday, the typical person, and the ordinary;
- respect a dialogic truth that emerges from voices that have not been heard

(Kim, 2016).

Indeed, the picture books examined in this study focus on the significance of everyday experiences in the lives of ordinary people living with their own experiences of

marginalization. For example, the authors shared painful experiences from their lives that were defining experiences, which informed their motivation to bring additional voices to children's literature. Specific examples of these experiences included being called Osama Bin Laden's sister, being racially profiled in an airport in front of a child, and being excluded from family events due to cultural views of menstruation. These experiences were not included in the children's books but brought authenticity to their narratives and underscored the need for diverse literature for children. Although the characters across these books may appear ordinary, their voices have rarely been heard or represented in mainstream children's books. What emerges across these books are voices of immigrants, racial identity, religious identity, gender identity, spiritual identity, physically challenged identity, and atheist identity. As discussed by Bakhtin (Kim, 2016), readers are drawn to characters whose everyday experiences are like their own and with whom they can connect. As such, the authors included in the study provide readers with important additional opportunities for children to connect with and gravitate toward children's literature.

Clinical psychology research has demonstrated that even talking and learning about religious and spiritual identity may be essential to healthy development (Miller, 2015). Unfortunately, spiritual and religious identity has rarely been depicted in non-proselytizing children's picture books. Consequently, it was vital to understand the experience of children's authors who chose to represent spiritual and religious identity in their books and to understand the motivation(s) behind those decisions. de la Peña touched on his approach to crafting books in addition to the psychology of children's books:

One other thing: I don't think any writer should go into a book with a message, but I do think you go in with a point of view, and for me, that's just the way you see the world. If you do grow up or sort of-- you're like in the religious world, maybe you go to church every week, and now you're a writer. That's going to come through in your book. It's not like you're proselytizing, but that's part of your point of view. This is the way I see the world. This is part of the day, or the Sunday in Last Stop on Market Street. Yes, I love that relationship, but I want to always err on the side of the child. I actually think-- Some of my favorite picture books I've read, the ones that I think are the strongest, they actually are not only honoring the child, they're honoring the psychology of the child. If you look at Where The Wild Things Are, there are so many books that do this, but that one was fantastic, where you're watching a child go to this place where the wild things are. Now, they're trying on adult sensibility. Sending the monsters to bed without their supper—It's like you're watching a child process the adult world through that picture book and then come back to the real world. I love books that do that. So, that's not really thinking about the adult in the equation. It's thinking only about the kid. Then there's so many things you could have a conversation about.

Limitations

This study represents a starting point for future research that examines the motivations of authors who include themes of religion and spirituality in children's picture books. Despite the numerous strengths of this study, including its novelty, there are limitations to note. First, as the researcher, I read many children's picture books to

identify five books that represented five different religions and one that represented atheism. As a public school teacher, I specifically sought books I could read in a public school setting that would not raise concerns regarding proselytizing or evangelizing. However, this may have limited the books chosen for this study and potentially excluded authors who utilized more direct or even proselytizing elements in their books. Future research may include an exploration of such authors if different or similar themes emerge from interviews.

There are also potential limitations regarding the representative nature of the picture books included in the current study. For example, the study included award-winning books that might not represent the broader spectrum of children's literature, where such detailed and sensitive representation might be less prevalent. In addition, books that included spiritual or religious themes but were not critically acclaimed were not included. Although this may have limited the generalizability of authors' experiences, this approach was taken to identify books aligned with the U.S. Department of Education's view on the comparative study of religion. Geographic and political boundaries within the United States also limit the findings' generalizability. Indeed, the current study's conclusions may not apply to authors from other regions of the world (e.g., Europe) who include spiritual or religious themes in the work. Additional research may be conducted to explore the extent to which themes identified in the current study are reflected among authors from other world regions.

Despite these potential limitations, the current study expands what is known about the lived experience and perspectives of children's picture book authors who depict religious or spiritual themes in their work. The findings support prior theoretical research by

researchers, including Hirsch (1967) and Dewey (Dewey, 1938; Kim, 2016), highlighting the importance of representative children's literature. Future research may address the current study's limitations by expanding the eligibility criteria for authors to gain additional perspectives and increase the generalizability of research findings.

Implications for Future Research

The emergence of themes such as "creating an inclusive environment" and the "impact of diverse community" highlight the need for additional research on how children's literature can foster inclusivity and understanding of diverse religious and spiritual experiences and identities. As stated earlier, this study utilizes Bishop's (1990) model of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors by going below surface appearances to discuss what is beneath the surface, such as individuals' religious and spiritual identities that form the core of culture.

As also discussed earlier, Reem Faruqi's book *Lailah's Lunchbox* has been banned pending further investigation in Duval County Public Schools in Florida. In addition, the books *Last Stop on Market Street* and *Carmella Full of Wishes* by Matt de la Peña, and illustrated by Christian Robinson, have been banned in Central York School District in Pennsylvania. *Mexican White Boy* by de la Peña has been banned in libraries and classrooms in the Indian River County School District in Florida. *Milo Imagines the World* by de la Peña and, illustrated by Christian Robinson, has been banned pending investigation in Escambia Public Schools Florida because it refers to incarceration and includes an illustration of two women getting married (<https://pen.org/book-bans>). Expanding this study to examine the actual impact of these books on public school teachers and young readers, particularly their understanding of religion, spirituality, and

atheism, would provide more data about the effect on these two stakeholders. Indeed, future research may examine the interrelationships between authors' intentions and lived experiences and those of readers and teachers.

The broad base of research in literacy can be expanded with:

- comparative studies across different cultures and religions to explore universal and unique themes in children's literature;
- longitudinal studies to observe how changing societal attitudes towards religion and spirituality affect children's literature and vice versa;
- research into the effects of book banning and controversy on authors' experience, public discourse, and children's understanding of diverse cultural experiences; and
- specifically, studies of the impact of these illustrations on the child reader's understanding and perception of different religions and cultures.

Recommendations

This current study highlights the need for advocacy that supports greater inclusion and representation in children's literature in school settings, especially from underrepresented religious and cultural backgrounds. These findings represent a call to publishers and educators to acknowledge and promote books that foster empathy, dialogue, and understanding of different religious and spiritual perspectives. In addition to solid narratives, there is a strong need for a continued emphasis on cultural authenticity and sensitivity in illustrations, ensuring diverse representation in children's literature. These goals may be supported by programs and initiatives that recruit and support

children's authors from diverse backgrounds and experiences to develop and disseminate their work.

These ideas are reflected by Simran Jeet Singh, who explained:

I think, ultimately, this question of becoming a default representative of the community is an argument for the need. It tells us how important it is to have more stories out there from diverse communities. If yours is the only story or you're the only writer, then people will come to expect that you are the de facto representative and that what you have experienced is the only experience. It's just a commentary on the need for more opportunities, for more writers, for more stories, and for more books that show the richness and complexity of our communities.

In conclusion, this chapter links children's authors' motivations with their works' nuanced depictions of religious and spiritual themes and the broader implications of these narratives within the educational landscape. It has illuminated the intricacies between personal experience and public expression, and between individual beliefs and collective understanding. The insights gleaned from these authors not only enrich our comprehension of literary intent but also reinforce the significance of inclusive representation in children's literature, an aspiration for writers and illustrators if they are to continue to strive toward the goal of a more empathetic and culturally aware society. Through the theories of Dewey and Bakhtin (Kim, 2016) and the poignant revelations from the authors and illustrators themselves, we are reminded of the transformative power of storytelling, which can shape perspectives, bridge gaps and, above all, affirm us and our identities. This study, while acknowledging its boundaries, offers a foundational

understanding and a stepping stone for future research, advocating for continued exploration of the rich children's literature that reflects the world in which we live.

APPENDIX A IRB APPROVAL MEMO

1/28/24, 4:30 PM

IRB-FY2023-348 - Initial: Initial - Expedited - St. John's

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>

Tue 5/23/2023 7:31 PM

To: Kenneth J. Eiker <kenneth.eiker20@my.stjohns.edu>; Michael Sampson <sampsonm@stjohns.edu>

* External Email *



Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

May 23, 2023 7:31:35 PM EDT

PI: Kenneth Eiker
CO-PI: Michael Sampson
The School of Education, Education Specialties

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2023-348** *What Motivates Authors to Include Religious Identity in Children's Picture Books?*

Dear Kenneth Eiker:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *What Motivates Authors to Include Religious Identity in Children's Picture Books?*. The approval is effective from May 23, 2023 through May 20, 2024.

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category:

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology

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Vita

Name	<i>Kenneth J. Eiker</i>
Baccalaureate Degree	<i>Bachelor of Arts, Lynchburg College, Lynchburg Major: Sociology</i>
Date Graduated	<i>May, 1987</i>
Other Degrees and Certificates	<i>Master of Administration, Lynchburg College, Lynchburg, Personnel Administration: 1997</i> <i>Master of Arts, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, Elementary Teaching: 2001</i>