Project Overview and Description

The idea of a calling is a familiar concept in the sociology of religion. This notion became part of the sociological canon through Max Weber’s classic work *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* (completed in 1905), in which he traced power and unintended consequences of a vocational calling in the emergence of the modern capitalist system. While the workplace was at one time deeply connected to religious meaning, Weber argued, modernity locked religion out of the marketplace.

Recent studies, however, reveal that the relationship between faith and work is not completely lost. In my work on religion, culture, and globalization among evangelical Christian international students studying in American colleges and universities, the idea of a calling emerged as an important component of their sense of who they are (identity) and what they are capable of doing in the world (agency). Drawing from life history interviews and photo elicitation interviews with 46 current and former students from India, China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, this project discusses the role and significance of a calling in the everyday lives of international students involved in evangelical Christianity during their sojourn in the United States. I explore the ways in which interviewees’ faith shows up (or not) in the classroom, lab, workplace, and leisure activities. Likewise, I investigate the times and places religion is drawn upon to inform decisions, guide action, and to navigate the uncertainties associated with living in a foreign country, the frustrations of scientific discovery, and the ambiguities of the future.
This research was the basis of my doctoral thesis. While the project led to a defendable dissertation, much remains to be done to transform it into a publishable book manuscript. Unfortunately, time is not on my side. The demands of rebuilding the Department of Sociology, which include teaching overloads, revising the curriculum, and administrative responsibilities leaves little time for pursuing this writing project. And for someone who has recently completed their graduate program, financial pressures influence decisions about teaching additional courses. Funding this proposal will advance and disseminate my research by relieving time pressures and opening up the creative space required to transform my thesis into a publishable book manuscript and at least one peer-reviewed journal article.

Goals

This project will pursue four broad goals:

1. Prospectus. Prepare a book proposal an academic or university press before February 2012, consisting of a proposal, chapter summaries, and one sample chapter.

2. Article. Prepare a second book chapter that will also be presented as a paper at a regional or national sociology conference and become a peer-reviewed journal article.


An Explanation of the Research Topic and Methodology

During the 2007-2008 academic year 623,805 international students were part of a global flow to American colleges and universities (Bhandari and Chow 2008). Half of all international students in the USA (49.3 percent) that year came from five Asian countries: India, China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. In pursuit of professional credentials, social capital, and cultural fluency, these future professionals stimulated the US economy to the tune of 22 billion dollars, making higher education one of the United States’ most important service sector exports (Bhandari and Chow 2008:16).

Along with the significance of their numbers and economic impact, international students are part of a major shift that is transforming American religion and extending its reach in new ways. Many international students arrive in the United States thinking they have migrated to a Christian nation. Stevens Thomas, who is originally from India, echoes a sentiment shared by many interviewees: “When I was planning to come to the United States . . . the big thing for me was the U.S. has a lot of Christians.” There are good reasons for this perception. In ways both subtle and obvious, American culture is informed by a Christian heritage, and that history continues to unfold in the lives of many. According to the Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey, for example, 78.4 percent of Americans claim affiliation with Christianity and 26.3 percent of the population identifies as evangelical (Lugo 2008:10). College students, according to the 1998 survey of college freshmen conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), fall into a similar pattern, with 77 percent of American college freshmen identifying as Christian.

On and off campus, international students encounter a demographic reality that may perpetuate the perception that to be American is to be Christian. Johnson and Ross estimate

---

1 While many disciplines may establish a theoretical framework through which to conduct research, this is not always the case in the social sciences. Instead, a methodological framework—in this case a qualitative one—is emphasized. The theoretical backdrop for this project is discussed in the subsequent section of this proposal.
that 33.2 percent of the world population is Christian (2009:6). Interestingly, Christianity among international students in the United States occurs at rates much higher than what Johnson and Ross might suggest. An analysis of HERI Freshman Survey results from the last twenty-five years (1985-2010), for example, reveals that on-campus first-year undergraduate (i.e., freshmen) international students identify as Christians at an average rate of 51 percent. And 20 percent of freshman internationals self-identify as born again Christians, a designation typically associated with evangelicalism.

Off campus, many internationals encounter curious rates of religious participation among immigrants from their own countries. Christianity, Yang observes, “has probably become the most practiced institutional religion among the Chinese in America” (Yang 2005:425) with approximately 23 percent of the immigrant population identifying as Christian (Lien and Carnes 2004). This is quite different from an international student’s experience of Christianity at home in mainland China, where estimates of the number of Christians range from 2 to 8 percent (Abel 2008; Bays 2003; Johnson and Grim 2009; Lambert 2003; Tang 2009; Yang 2005). Students from Taiwan leave a context where 3.9 percent affiliate with Christianity and arrive in a place where 25 percent of the immigrant Taiwanese population is affiliated (Chen 2008:39). South Koreans, who come from a country where Christianity is estimated to be as high as 41 percent of the population (Johnson and Grim 2009), find that 79 percent of Korean Americans identify as Christians (Lien and Carnes 2004). Japanese students would be hard pressed to find a Christian at home, where they comprise less than 2 percent of the population (Johnson and Grim 2009); among Japanese in America, however, nearly four in ten identify as Christians (Lien and Carnes 2004). By contrast, students from India may not detect the slight decline from 5 percent Christian at home (Johnson and Grim 2009) to 3 percent in the United States (Lien and Carnes 2004).

These shifts in religious affiliation among diaspora communities are known to “shape
the negotiation of religious and ethnic identities” (Chen 2008:190). Migration to a context where the dominant religious framework is different from that of their homeland, among other things, “free[s] people to experiment with new religious identities” (Lien and Carnes 2004:41). It is within this milieu that some international students come into contact with evangelical Christians in America (Abel 2006; Phillips and Norsworthy 1997; Salem and Salem 2009; Wang and Yang 2006). Among those that do, some convert to Christianity and embrace evangelical culture. Others, who are not the focus of this research, may become less conservative or give up their faith as a result of their sojourn in the United States.

This research involves 46 international students from the five Asian countries that send the most students to the USA: India, China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Participants include men and women, current undergraduate and graduate students, former international students, and people who converted to Christianity before and after coming to the USA. Most interviewees are or were enrolled in colleges and universities in the Boston, Massachusetts metropolitan area, which boasts the third highest concentration of international students in the United States (23,818) behind New York City (51,973) and Los Angeles (35,870) (Bhandari and Chow 2008:11). Half of study participants are affiliated with one of five schools: Boston University, Harvard University, Boston College, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Other colleges and universities represented in the study include Tufts University, Northeastern, New England Conservatory, University of Massachusetts, Longy School of Music, Clark University, Mt. Ida College, and Boston Conservatory. Along with being affiliated with a variety of schools, interviewees’ fields of study approximate the overall population of international students enrolled in the United States during the 2007-2008 academic year.

2 Four interviewees who were graduate students enrolled in divinity schools in the Boston area. Among them, two were preparing for careers as counselors in non-religious organizations, one was preparing for a career as a missionary, and one for an academic career as a theologian.
This ethnography investigates the ways in which international students are shaped by evangelical Christianity by using three research techniques: participant observation, semi-structured life history interviews, and photo elicitation interviews (cf. Ammerman and Williams, forthcoming 2012). Through participant observation, I explored interviewees’ religious, cultural, and relational contexts. I worshipped with them. I studied the Bible with them. I prayed with them. I participated in social events. I ate with them. I laughed with them. I gave them rides to and from events. I attended regional, national, and international conferences. In the event a meeting was conducted in a foreign language (e.g., Chinese) someone was appointed or volunteered to act as my interpreter. Even though these kind people were capable translators, much of what happened in these meetings admittedly went unobserved.

In an effort to move beyond cultural barriers, I used multiple interview techniques. I conducted semi-structured life history interviews with each subject and photo elicitation interviews with 26 participants for a total of 72 interviews. In the initial interview, I asked participants to tell me their life story by imagining that their life was a book organized around chapters (cf. McAdams 1993:251ff). These chapters, I told interviewees, could be arranged by theme, location, chronology, or in any other way that made sense to them. Most participants in the research followed a chronological organization. Frequently they told stories that progressed in space and time: I grew up in . . . when I reached high school . . . I decided to go to college in the United States . . . . Given that all participants were evangelicals, it is not surprising that most narratives contained the elements of a testimony and included descriptions of what they were like before becoming Christians, the circumstances of their conversions, how life changed after believing, and the ways in which their faith makes a difference in their everyday lives.
The initial interview also explored participants’ beliefs and practices, relationships, and the ways they navigate between their home and host cultures with a particular interest in understanding perceptions of how interviewees changed during their sojourn. Later in the interview I asked participants about the relationship between their faith and field of study, their career aspirations, whether or not they believe God has a plan for their lives, and what a better world might look like.

I also employed photo elicitation interviews (PEIs) to gain further insight into the lives of participants (Clark 1999; Clark-Ibáñez 2004; Harper 2002; Williams 2010). PEIs enhanced the communication process in interviews with non-native speakers of English. Where language may have failed, a photograph taken by the interviewee provided another medium of communication. Subjects were invited to use their own digital camera to take 10-20 pictures to document what their everyday life is like. In the event they did not have access to a digital camera, a 27-exposure disposable camera was provided. The resulting photographs were used in an interview to explore their daily lived experiences in which I simply asked study participants to tell me the story behind the photo. This technique produced over 400 photographs and generated countless narrative accounts of the ways identity and action are shaped by the idea of a calling.

Where the Project fits in the Literature

For some time in the social sciences, religion was expected to be structured out of the social system (Weber 2002 [1905]), understood as something restricted to special times and places (Durkheim 1995 [1912]), or regarded as having lost its plausibility (e.g., Berger 1967). The so-called secularization thesis cast a long shadow on the sociological study of religion, leaving many in the academy to “simply assume that religion has no effect” on domains of everyday life such as the workplace (Davidson and Caddell 1994:135, their italics). Recent
studies, however, are shedding light on the myriad ways people carry their faith into places where the old sociological paradigm (i.e., the secularization thesis; cf. Warner 1993) would consider religion out of bounds (e.g., Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008; Williams 2010). This study also ventures in this new theoretical direction, to investigate religion in the everyday lives of evangelical Christian international students.

This research is part of an ongoing conversation among sociologists about the relationship between work and faith. Bellah and his colleagues observe that “the idea of a calling has become attenuated and the largely private ‘job’ and ‘career’ have taken its place, something of the notion of a calling lingers on, not necessarily opposed to, but in addition to, job and career” (1985:66). Their suggestion that certain careers are more conducive to a calling is consistent with the findings of Davidson and Caddell, who report that those who “worked with people thought of their work as a calling more than twice as often as people who worked with things” (1994:141). Davidson and Caddell also identify a positive relationship between calling and social justice beliefs, high rates of religious participation (i.e., church attendance), and the salience of religion among the Midwestern Catholics and Protestants in their survey. In his analysis of faith’s influence on attitudes toward work and money, Wuthnow also identifies a connection between calling and religious commitment: “among the most actively religious segment of the [American] population, the idea of a calling is meaningful to about one person in every two” (1994:69). And Scott observes that conservative Protestants are “more likely to identify with notions of calling, are more likely to consciously think about connections between faith and work, and are more likely to exhibit religious behavior at work” (1999:74).

My study contributes to this conversation by examining the ways in which a calling bridges faith, career aspirations, and everyday life. Through participation in evangelical Christian ministries that cater to international students, I argue, these men and women
become aware of a calling, the idea that God has a plan or purpose for their lives. As this calling becomes wound up in academic and career pursuits, occupations take on new meaning and greater importance (Davidson and Caddell 1994; Dik and Duffy 2009; Scott 1999; Wuthnow 1994). No longer is someone simply preparing to become or working as an engineer, biologist, legal expert, or journalist. Instead, they are tasked with accomplishing God’s redemptive purposes in, through, and even despite their work. A sense of calling, I contend, makes a difference in the way these people approach their studies and careers because calling transforms a profession into a religious vocation. And I am persuaded that my findings make an original contribution to the literature and will prove insightful for those involved in ministry to international students.

**Christianity and Sociology**

While I am not prepared to go as far as John Milbank (1990), who argues that sociology is—or at least ought to be—a theological enterprise, sociology is integral to my Christian faith and central to the mission of the Church in the world (see Williams forthcoming 2012). Sociology is an invitation to step back from the everyday, taken-for-granted social world and to gaze upon the familiar from a new perspective. It offers a robust set of methodological and theoretical tools uniquely suited to the description, explanation, and assessment of the social and cultural forces that shape the myriad ways in which people live and interact in the contemporary world. In turn, the same intellectual tools that illuminate how the social world operates are useful in imagining ways to repair and transform society and culture. As sociologist Richard Perkins argues, Christians “need to understand how social reality is constructed and how it can be reconstructed . . . to help build the kingdom of God” (1989:205).

Since the early church, Christianity has been a social movement, one that is committed to the great commandment and the great commission. Sociology’s interest in understanding
and transforming society supports the great commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. This is accomplished through an analysis of how the social world works, a critical assessment of society and culture, and sociologically-informed strategies that address social problems and pursue societal change in ways that move social action beyond merely addressing symptoms.

Sociology is also central to the great commission. Historically, Christians involved in the evangelistic mission of the church have appropriated the insights of anthropology to great effect (e.g., Heibert 1985; Kraft 1996). What anthropology was to traditional missionary outreach, sociology is to the Church's contemporary global mission. By enabling the perception of social phenomena such as norms and values, patterns of interaction, social trends, or the causes and consequences of structural inequalities, gospel bearers are better equipped to cross cultural barriers, develop authentic (or 'contextualized') strategies of outreach, and communicate the Christian message in compelling ways.

While sound theological commitments may undergird one's critique of culture, social activism, or missional pursuits, those outside the faith often do not share the same sources of authority, morality, or power. Sociology offers a vernacular for communicating and pursuing Christian purposes in the public square. Fluency in a logic, rhetoric, and standard of veracity common to fellow citizens who may not share a commitment to following Christ is essential to a faith that is winsome.

This project appropriates sociology in support of the great commandment and the great commission. Through my work I will demonstrate the value, utility, and positive effects of evangelical Christianity in everyday life. This project will make original contributions in the areas of the fields of sociology of religion and missiology.³ Likewise, the book and articles I

---
³ Along with publishing with an academic or university press and peer-reviewed sociology journals, I also anticipate submitting one article to a peer reviewed journal dedicated to missiology such as Social Science and Missions, Missiology, or International Bulletin of Missionary Research.
produce will support full-time and volunteer Christian workers as they pursue their calling to
international students.

**Tentative Schedule**

- **November–January 2012**  Prepare Book Proposal
- **February–June 2012**  Prepare Book Manuscript and Paper/Journal Article
- **March 21-24, 2012**  Present Paper at the Southern Sociological Society meeting
- **August 15, 2012**  Submit Peer-Reviewed Journal Article
- **August–January 2012**  Complete Manuscript
- **November 9-11, 2012**  Present Chapter/Paper at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion annual meeting
- **April 2013**  Report to Pew Committee Luncheon

**Budget**

- Salary Replacement for January and June 2012 Courses  $4200
- Book Allowance  300

---

$4500
Works Cited


We pray for God to mold us as live vessels in His hands through which the Gospel may be carried to the ends of the earth.

TOTAL CHURCHES.

At God will Provide Missionary School our number one priority is not education, but having a personal relationship with God.

MORE INFORMATION.