ABSTRACT

"Mount Holyoke College is a cult." This phrase, undoubtedly familiar to most MHC students, refers to the intricacies of College traditions which mark events as singular as graduation and mundane as ascending the Library stairs. Some traditions, like the Pangy Day barbecue, serve as quaint moments of respite from the rigor of academic life, while others, like the century-old procession of the Laurel Parade, in which Seniors dressed in white bring offerings of laurel and roses to the grave of Mary Lyon, take on a distinctly religious flair. What is it about Mount Holyoke traditions that makes them so compelling, pervasive, and critical to the College's self-understanding? Does Mount Holyoke have its own religion?

This thesis, entitled "Mount Holyoke, We Pay Thee Devotion: Ritual and the Collegiate Religion at MHC," argues that Mount Holyoke traditions constitute a "collegiate religion," based on the theory of "civil religion" developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau,[1] and expanded by Robert Bellah.[2] The collegiate religion is the means by which the College sacralizes itself through ritual, and is defined by common practice and group identity formation rather than dogma or personal belief. Challenging the notion that colleges are purely rational spaces, or that higher education is just a "head thing," collegiate religion is a framework for understanding the embodied, affective, and communal dimensions of institutional participation.

My argument employs theoretical, archival, and ethnographic methods. Through close analysis of both civil religion and ritual theory, I differentiate collegiate religion from civil religion, contextualizing collegiate religion within a longstanding scholarly conversation on the political role of ritual, and applying detailed ritual analysis to key Mount Holyoke traditions, including Mountain Day, May Day, and the Laurel Parade. My archival analysis traces the development of these traditions through history, and ethnographic interviews demonstrate how these traditions are understood, practiced, and marketed today.

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[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses,* ed. Susan Dunn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

[2] Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," Daedalus 134, no. 4 (2005): http://www.jstor.org/stable/20028013

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

MOUNT HOLYOKE, WE PAY THEE DEVOTION: RITUAL AND THE COLLEGIATE RELIGION AT MHC

by

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Introduction

As a scholar of religion, I cannot help but notice the highly ritualized traditions that mark a student's passage through America's oldest women's college. These traditions, held in high regard and defended fiercely by students, alumnae, and the administration alike, hold a certain power to inspire, unite, and motivate their participants beyond what I have witnessed anywhere other than in a religious space. These similarities become more evident as I explain the somber Honor Code Ceremony, the intricacies of predicting Mountain Day, or the reasons why my underclass friends and I must pause our conversations to take separate staircases in the Williston Library atrium. Even faculty are often surprised to learn of the ritual world in which we students move. The world of Mount Holyoke traditions are like another plane with its own laws and codes, accessible only to the initiated. Through a series of similar conversations throughout my academic career, often concluding in an admission that I don't truly know why Mount Holyoke students do what we do, I have come to realize that there is something truly unique about Mount Holyoke tradition, and that its particular qualities can be understood through an analysis of these practices as ritual.

The initial idea for this thesis began out of my fascination with the new religious systems being developed by neo-pagan individuals and groups across the United States. Through innovative and artful blending of folklore, tradition, myth, and magic, these groups consciously create new religions that resonate with their history, homeland, and personal spiritual leanings. If a small group in New Jersey has enough raw mythic material to devote themselves to the Jersey

Devil, I wondered, do Mount Holyoke students have enough to build a cult of Mary Lyon?[3] What would it look like, and what would its rituals be? How could I compare the qualities of Mount Holyoke tradition to those of these new religions, and more established models of initiation, sacrifice, and sainthood? As an imaginative exercise, I considered these questions, and as I shared my observations with friends and colleagues, a substantial project began to take shape. I would determine what it is that makes Mount Holyoke tradition so uniquely compelling, and explore its possibilities for defining a more formal quasi-religious system.

Over the course of my research, I eventually found a name for this ineffable quality—the structures which I had been investigating closely fit the model of "civil religion." Occupying the same space between secular and sacred which had challenged my initial construction of a Mount Holyoke religion, civil religion offered a starting point from which I could analyze its various features, including belief and meaning, ritual structures, symbology, and the power relations and interests which preserve and promote some traditions while casting others aside. Through transformation of this theory to reflect the scale and structure of a college as opposed to a nation, as well as injection of more specific ritual and gender analysis, I have arrived at a model of civil religion that I feel can be used to understand the structure and function of Mount Holyoke tradition, and may be applied to other colleges and universities as well. While many of the specifics, as I will demonstrate, are unique to Mount Holyoke, similar structures do exist in other institutions, and these theories can certainly be adapted to suit each individual case. As we know from the field of ritual studies, definitions and structures must be fluid and tailored to the needs

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[3] "Episode 86— Local Witchcraft with Chris Orapello," interview, *New World Witchery* (audio blog), January 11, 2016, , https://newworldwitchery.com/tag/chris-orapello/.

of a particular investigation, while retaining some quality of unity that defines them as belonging to the same field of study.

I begin by laying a theoretical groundwork for the interpretation of my source material in Chapter One. Émile Durkheim, Robert Bellah, David Kertzer, and others frame my constructions of ritual, civil religion, belief, and meaning. I expand upon these in Chapter Two, in which I begin my exploration of specific communal aspects of Mount Holyoke ritual practice through case studies and archival material. Rituals in this chapter form the core of both Mount Holyoke Collegiate religion and my analysis of it, and their longevity, transformation, and rich symbolic components earn them a place at the center of my argument. In Chapter Three, I examine individual interpretations of contemporary practices, introduced within the last forty years, which have established themselves with a similarly powerful presence as the more long standing traditions. Informed by ethnographic research through interviews and contemporary source material, this chapter provides an examination of the collegiate religion in its present state. The thesis concludes with potential areas for further investigation, and my argument for the significance of the collegiate religion within the broader academic discourse.

Beyond mere curiosity for the ritual and traditional aspects of Mount Holyoke College life, two broader agendas influence the construction of this project. The larger of these comes from my experience in the Religion department, and my relentless push to convince people of the ways in which religion is deeply formative of every aspect of society. Especially in contemporary American life, subtle religious undertones in the shaping of what many consider secular values are a key to understanding the political, economic, and social situations whose influences directly affect the lives of every American. Many of the most secular-seeming notions in American society, such as our understanding of freedom, constructions of gender, and our

family systems can be clearly understood through investigation of the religious agendas which shaped their creation, and which they work to support. I hope for this project to serve as a detailed microcosmic analysis of this phenomenon, and as a demonstration of the power of ritual and religious symbology in a purportedly rational, secular space. (Mount Holyoke specifically has a somewhat different relationship than other American colleges to religion, as it originated as a women's seminary, as detailed further in Chapter One).

The second goal, following on the heels of the first, emerges from my double-major and experience in the Gender Studies department at Mount Holyoke, which have shaped my understanding of intersectionality, and the multiple axes of identity, privilege, and oppression which affect how different individuals and groups experience the same structures and events. By applying an intersectional lens to Mount Holyoke traditions, I identify ways in which the ideal of "community" formed through ritual implicitly requires certain types of bodies and identities thus preventing the formation of community even within rituals designed to strengthen it. This sensibility also influences the ways that I have chosen to write about the gendered dimension of Mount Holyoke life. Although Mount Holyoke is a historically women's college, we know that students representing every part of the gender spectrum have always made homes and been vital parts of the community at MHC. Particularly when dealing with archival materials, as I do, the erasure of trans and gender-non-conforming histories is a serious risk. Whenever possible, I refer to Mount Holyoke students simply as "students." However, there are also moments when it is appropriate and necessary to refer to them as "women" as a broad indicator of social positioning, and to analyze the gendered expectations, imagery, and behaviors which shape the collegiate religion. This thesis is not primarily a gender analysis, but I do acknowledge and encourage the

possibility of trans, queer, and other marginal readings, without which this project remains incomplete.

Combining the contemporary strategies of these two disciplines with ritual theory, extensive archival research into Mount Holyoke traditions, and individual interviews with members of the MHC community, I strive to present a construction of Mount Holyoke collegiate religion which is true both to ritual convention and the lived experiences of its participants, and legitimizes collegiate experiences as ritually and religiously significant.

Chapter One

Theoretical Foundations

Civil Religion, Collegiate Religion

> *"Every brick of this house is consecrated. You must not call this Miss Lyon's school. I regard it so truly as a child of Providence that I do not like to have my name made prominent. And you would look upon it as I do if you could see the many gulfs that were to me impassable, bridged over by the divine Hand. Sometimes all seemed to hang upon some slight pivot, without which the whole would have fallen to the ground. I can see a ruling Hand in everything connected with its establishment, and I would have you ever remember that you are studying in an institution built by the hand of the Lord." —Report by a student from one of Mary Lyon's talks, date unknown.*[4]

In attempting to broadly define the nature of Mount Holyoke culture, as influenced by its rich traditions and lore, the closest scholarly designation is that of "civil religion." This theory, originally referring to a nation's strategic use of religious structures to promote the devotion of its citizens, may also be applied as an analytical lens for smaller-scale examinations of institutions such as colleges and universities. This application, and the challenges and transformations of civil religion which it represents, I refer to as "collegiate religion."

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[4] Marion Florence Lansing, *Mary Lyon: Through Her Letters* (S.I.: Boucher Press, 2007), 218.

My construction of Mount Holyoke collegiate religion synthesizes three interpretations: those of Rousseau, who coined the term in *The Social Contract*, Robert Bellah, who theorized most extensively on the relevance of civil religion in the United States, and Barry Stephenson, who expands upon Bellah, developing more generalized criteria for the identification of civil religion. Other theorists, such as David Kertzer, serve to temper Bellah's romanticizing tendencies, and Émile Durkheim and Victor Turner illustrate key ritual concepts of *effervescence* and *communitas.*

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau imagines three types of religion: religion of the individual, religion of the state, and a mixture of the two, which he deems too chaotic to merit serious investigation.[5][6] It is the second type, religion of the state, or "civil religion," which is of the greatest interest to Rousseau's theories of nation-building. His conception of civil religion is straightforward:

> "The dogmas … ought to be simple, few in number, stated with precision, and without explanations or commentaries. The existence of the Deity… the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract and of the laws; these are the positive dogmas. As for the negative dogmas, I limit them to one only, that is, intolerance; it belongs to the creeds which we have excluded."[7]

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[5]Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 250.

[6]"The third is so evidently bad that it would be a waste of time to stop and prove this." Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 250

[7] Rousseau, 253.

As we will see further in Bellah's writing, Rousseau borrows heavily from Christian ideology in his construction of the ideal civil religion. The existence of a single god, "the Deity," a life after death, and reward and punishment for the "just" and "wicked" are deeply related to Rousseau's Christian beliefs and those of his society. From this description, it is unclear how the civil religion is different from Christianity, and why it matters—why create a new system of belief when a nation could simply co-opt the one which is already popular among its citizens? Rousseau, shaped by the French Revolution, did not want to create a religious oligarchy—he sought to theorize a new kind of religion unique to the republican experiment. This "civil religion" would access the passion inspired by the Church and direct it toward the goals of the nation: "…to die for one's country [would be] to achieve martyrdom, to violate the laws … to be impious, and to subject a guilty man to public execration … to subject him to the wrath of the gods."[8] Rousseau did not, however, intend for civil religion to replace Christianity- in fact, he cites its potential to overshadow "true worship" as a serious danger.[9]

In his book, *Ritual, Politics, and Power,* David Kertzer speaks to the apparent strangeness of attributing sacred qualities to political action. In his own words, "anthropologists have long been associated in the public view with the search for quaint rites and seemingly illogical behavior. My goal, however, is not to exhume the exotic but to challenge some comfortable assumptions about the bases of our own political systems."[10] A similar principle

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[8] Rousseau, 250.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Kertzer, David I., *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 3.

operates here. I do not seek to imagine an alternative reality in which Mount Holyoke traditions are interpreted literally as vehicles of ultimate religious truth, but to provide evidence for a ritual foundation of the Mount Holyoke collegiate identity, challenging the notion that colleges in particular exist to serve exclusively rational needs, or that higher education is just a "head thing." I construct collegiate religion as a framework for theoretical understanding of the embodied, affective, and communal dimensions of institutional participation which are already present in the College structure.

Robert Bellah approaches Rousseau's theory from a more secular perspective. While he does not argue for the moral necessity of individuals to adhere to Christianity, he does examine its influence in the construction of American civil religion: specifically, the ways in which American self-understanding emerges from a narrative and set of ritual observances which closely mirror those of Christianity, but which are functionally different and unique. Bellah also differs from Rousseau in that his analysis constructs "the" civil religion as a specifically American phenomenon. While he mentions French civil religion in passing, and does not argue that Americans have an exclusive claim to it, he does also strive to analyze a distinctly American set of beliefs and practices, and does not attempt to generalize them as Stephenson later does.

To frame his analysis, Bellah examines the inaugural address of John F. Kennedy, in which the President makes frequent mention of God as the highest moral authority to which his governance will be accountable. While Kennedy's Catholic beliefs were well-known, he avoids sectarian, or even Christian, specifics in his speech, appealing to the general idea of a higher

power which would resonate with most of his American audience.[11] Rather than viewing these statements as proselytizing, or a mere appeasement of his Protestant critics, Bellah argues: "What people say on solemn occasions need not be taken at face value, but it is often indicative of deep-seated values and commitments that are not made explicit in the course of everyday life."[12] This is also one of the core arguments of my analysis of Mount Holyoke Collegiate religion: while there are no daily prayers to Mary Lyon, the patterns of student and administrative conduct on "solemn occasions" reflect civil sacred truths, which are no less sacred for their subtle influence.

Bellah traces the development of American civil religion chronologically, identifying specific moments, figures, and practices as they emerge. In brief summary, his points include an understanding of America as analogous to Biblical Israel, with the Revolutionary War as an exodus, "The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution [as] the sacred scriptures[,] and Washington the divinely appointed Moses who led his people out of the hands of tyranny."[13] The greatest period of (trans)formation for the American civil religion comes during the Civil War, in which Abraham Lincoln emerges as a national savior and martyr,[14] and the sacred text of the Gettysburg Address enters the American consciousness. Bellah quotes Robert Lowell to emphasize the gravity of this moment:

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[11] Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005): http://www.jstor.org/stable/20028013, 41.

[12] Bellah, "Civil Religion," 41.

[13] Bellah, 45-47.

[14] Bellah, 47-48.

> "By his words, he gave the field of battle a symbolic significance that it had lacked. For us and our country, he left Jefferson's ideals of freedom and equality joined to the Christian sacrificial act of death and rebirth. … This is a meaning that goes beyond sect or religion and beyond peace and war, and is now part of our lives as a challenge, obstacle and hope."[15]

Out of the Civil War emerges a need for new public monuments and expressions of grief, resulting in the institution of Memorial Day, war monuments, and the construction of national cemeteries.[16] "Together with the less overtly religious Fourth of July and the more minor celebrations of Veterans Day and the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln, these two holidays provide an annual ritual calendar for the civil religion."[17]

Zooming out from these specific moments, Bellah identifies three "times of trial" which characterize the narrative of the American Civil Religion. The first is the struggle for independence, the second is the Civil War (and thus our reckoning with slavery), and the third extends to the contemporary moment, in which America (broadly conceived) must determine

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[15]Allan Nevins, *Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address*: *Commemorative Papers*, (Urbana: University of Illionois Press, 1964), quoted in Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," Daedalus 134, no. 4 (2005): http://www.jstor.org/stable/20028013, 48.

[16] Though Bellah does not address it, this is grief is not of a generic sort—many of these monuments were specifically constructed with Confederate agendas in mind, preserving the imagery and history of white supremacy despite the lost war.

Blight, David W., and Kirk Savage. "Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth- Century America." *The Journal of American History*85, no. 4 (1999): 1603. doi:10.2307/2568328.

[17] Bellah, 49.

how to responsibly conduct itself, having achieved worldwide power and status as a model (good or bad) for other nations.[18] According to Bellah, the meaning of this narrative is that:

> "…the civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or… as revealed through the experience of the American people. Like all religions, it has suffered various deformations and demonic distortions. At its best, it has neither been so general that it has lacked incisive relevance to the American scene nor so particular that it has placed American society above universal human values."[19]

Bellah's argument for the development and influence of civil religion in America is both concrete and compelling. However, his valorization of a single American narrative comes at the expense of marginal voices, and demonstrates an uneasiness with accepting American violence (especially towards Native Americans and enslaved people) as equally supported by the civil religion as its more positive ideals. Civil religion is not neutral, and to understand it as complete requires not simply dismissing its negative traits as "demonic distortions," but central elements which must be equally reckoned with.

In part due to its specificity to one nation and its history, Bellah's work also offers limited applications for the exploration of other types of civil religion. This is where the work of Barry Stephenson in his book *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction* becomes useful for my purposes. Stephenson identifies themes present in Bellah's work and translates them into more general categories, matched with parallel elements of conventional religion. Stephenson's breakdown is as follows:

1. Historical narratives = myths
2. Monumental buildings and statuary = sacred places

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[18] Ibid, 52-53.

[19] Ibid, 49.

3. Legendary figures = founders and heroes
4. Charters and constitutions = sacred texts
5. Public ceremonies = rituals
6. Civil holidays = liturgical cycles[20]

Stephenson also demonstrates the applications of these categories in non-American contexts, specifically examining their usefulness in overcoming sectarian Christian divides in Europe. "An individual would no longer be principally a Lutheran, a Calvinist, or a Catholic, for example, but a German, a Frenchman, an Englishman."[21] Though he concedes that these efforts "were only partially successful,"[22] this analysis opens an avenue for applications of civil religious theory outside of a single nation, which is where my own analysis of Mount Holyoke, functioning as part of, and developing concurrently with, the American nation, may find its origins.

The Mount Holyoke model of civil religion can be conceived in categories analogous to Stephenson's, although due to the much smaller size of one college measured up against a nation, each category contains fewer elements, and those elements serve deeply related purposes, which makes their separation challenging.[23] While I explore these connections at length in

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[20] Barry Stephenson, *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 45.

[21] Ibid, 45.

[22]Ibid

[23] Interestingly, although comparing Mount Holyoke and the United States results in tremendous differences due to population, land area, location, and institution vs. nation, the historical moments which define American civil religion have also left their mark on the College. Founded

Chapter 2, when formulating my analysis, a breakdown such as Stephenson's, paired with a narrative model similar to Bellah's, are both useful tools in laying the groundwork for my argument.

My construction of civil religion for Mount Holyoke modifies Stephenson's categories in several key ways. Firstly, the idea of "monumental buildings and statuary" functions differently in a college than in a nation—while Mount Holyoke certainly has its share of dedicated monuments, most notably Mary Lyon's grave, many memorial and honorary sites are constructed in advance, or unrelated to the purpose of, their dedication. These serve, at best, as a thematic connection to the interests of the figure or moment for whom they are named, or at worst, a spatially arbitrary recognition of presidents of the College or wealthy donors. It is necessary to examine the qualities that designate certain spaces as sacred, or monuments, rather than purely artistic or utilitarian. Secondly, charters and constitutions, while undeniably significant to the history of the College, are not held in the same sacred esteem as the founding documents of the United States. Rather, documents such as the Honor Code and lyrical texts fill this role. Lastly, the idea of "civil holidays" does not function perfectly within the College contexts, although there are many examples of College celebrations which constitute a liturgical cycle. The categories of historical narratives, legendary figures, and public ceremony require little modification to suit my analytical purposes. And, while Stephenson does not ascribe value to the order of his criteria, I find it significant to reorder my categories thusly: beginning with

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61 years after American Independence, and with only 26 states as part of the Union in 1837, the early years of the College coincided with those of the United States, and these histories are certainly intertwined.

legendary figures, followed by historical narratives, monuments and sacred space, holidays, ceremonies, and sacred texts. This order reflects the evolution of both the College and its practices, in addition to ascribing primacy to the collegiate religion's most formative elements.

Legendary figures

Any student of Mount Holyoke College, past or present, is likely to be able to give a short account of the life of Mary Lyon. The common narrative goes something like the following: Starting from nothing, Mary Lyon conceived the revolutionary idea for a college for women. It would be affordable, academically rigorous, and grounded in Christian values. Lyon walked the roads of Western Massachusetts, knocking on doors and sticking her foot in the wheel of farmers' carts to solicit donations, and eventually raised enough money and support to open the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1837. She died from an illness contracted from a student, and is buried on campus in the grove across from Abbey Chapel.

The College does have other legendary figures as well, with Hortense Parker, Mary Wooley, Jeanette Marks, and Frances Perkins being the most notable examples. As the Seminary's first Black graduate, Hortense Parker's legacy holds deep significance for MHC students of color, and since 2009, Hortense Parker Day has held speeches, film screenings, discussion groups, and musical performances in her honor.[24] Wooley and Marks, as a well-known, highly successful President-and-professor couple, are beloved figures of both the MHC Archives, which maintains extensive records and exhibits on their lives, and LGBTQ students.

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[24] "MHC Celebrates Hortense Parker Day April 15," Mount Holyoke College, May 02, 2013. https://www.mtholyoke.edu/media/mhc-celebrates-hortense-parker-day-april-15-0.

Frances Perkins, the first female US Cabinet Member, is the namesake of the Frances Perkins Scholar program, which recruits and financially supports students of nontraditional age, veterans, active military, and those with dependents.[25]

All of these figures, along with Mary Lyon and others, are formally recognized as saints of the Mount Holyoke canon through iconography. Both the library and Mary Lyon Hall contain identical images and descriptions of notable alumnae and their accomplishments, which students pass daily in busy staircases and hallways. Their hierarchy of significance, with Lyon at the top, forms a simple yet substantive canon, in which various figures symbolically create and oversee the dimension of Mount Holyoke life which they represent: for Emily Dickinson, poetry, for Virginia Apgar, medicine, and so on.

Historical narratives

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the historical narratives of the Mount Holyoke collegiate religion begin with Mary Lyon. To expand upon the folk wisdom surrounding her life: Lyon was born into a working-class family in Buckland, Massachusetts in 1797, a middle child in a family of nine.[26] Developing a taste for education at an early age, she was forced to temporarily leave school as a young teenager when her mother remarried and left Lyon and her brother to care for her family's farm.[27] During this time, Lyon mastered a variety of domestic skills which would

[25] "Frances Perkins Program," Mount Holyoke College, January 31, 2018. https://www.mtholyoke.edu/fp.

[26] Dorothy Rosen, *A Fire in Her Bones: The Story of Mary Lyon* (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 1995), 8.

[27] Ibid, 18-19.

later be key to the success of the Seminary, enabling her to return to school, now as a teacher, and to discover new depths of her love of education.[28] As her teaching reputation and experience grew, Lyon realized a particular aptitude for preparing young women to become teachers themselves, and she began to formulate her vision for a women's college—a serious academic institution which could provide a comparable education to the elite colleges of men.[29] Realizing that her own quick wit would not be enough to sell the concept of her school, Lyon assembled an all-male board of trustees to back her project, both granting it social legitimacy, and laying the groundwork for the school's longevity. Its financial model would not be based on profit, as many other female seminaries of Lyon's time were.[30] Despite considerable criticism of the project as improper, impossible, and un-Christian, Mount Holyoke Female Seminary[31] opened its doors in 1837, and was chartered as a college in 1888.[32]

A full history of the salient events which formed the College after 1888 is beyond the scope of this project. The Seminary years function as the College's mythic past, relaying the

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[28] Ibid, 27.

[29] Ibid, 47.

[30] Ibid, 58.

[31] Seminaries, as conceived in the 1830's, were not exclusively dedicated to the training of clergy, as is common today. This term referred to a range of institutions, often including those for women, which offered some kind of higher education through a Christian lens. Women's seminaries typically resembled finishing schools in their emphasis on domestic and social skills, and lacked academic rigor. Rosen, 65.

[32] Rosen, 65.

story of its founding and elevating the figure of Mary Lyon to the status of world-creator and common ancestor.

Monuments and sacred spaces

In a manner befitting her legacy, Lyon's grave is the primary monument at Mount Holyoke. A stone pillar surrounded by an ivy garden within a cast-iron gate marks the location where Lyon was buried in 1849, and which has become the site of several prominent civil rituals, most notably the Laurel Parade. Other, less solemn observances, such as the serving of ice cream on founder's day, Halloween dance performances, and attempts to summon Mountain Day by burning bras[33] have also taken place here. Some controversy surrounds this site, as there are claims that Lyon was actually buried on the campus of Kenyon college in Ohio, although College documents provide firm evidence to the contrary.[34] Nonetheless, the mysterious element adds to the appeal and draw of this site.

Lyon's grave is unique for its salient connection to a specific influential figure. Other significant sites of the Mount Holyoke collegiate religion, though also named after individuals from the College's history, are given meaning by the events which take place there, framed by the impressive architecture of the spaces themselves. The Williston Library, with its massive central tower and castle-like facade, anchors the campus landscape. After pushing aside two sets of heavy, carved wooden doors and passing through a dark entryway, the Library atrium is an explosion of light. Skylights three stories high shine onto a twelve-foot glass sculpture erupting

[33] See Chapter 3.
[34] See Appendix A: "Mary Lyon Burial"

from a medieval wellhead, and bright silk banners bearing the four traditional class colors and animals stand out against white and gray stone walls.[35] A visitor to the Library must take in all of these experiences before arriving at the double staircase which leads from the Atrium to the Reading Room. Here one must cross a perilous threshold: ascend the correct flight of stairs or be doomed to academic failure.

The Gettell amphitheater, by contrast, is a space into which one descends. Passing from the College road into the rows of grass and wooden benches, the relative importance of each step increases as it approaches the stage, where the most significant figures of a given event may be seen and heard. It is in the central front rows where Seniors will sit during Convocation, while underclassmen watch from the periphery. Upon Commencement, the Seniors will take the stage themselves as graduates and speakers, commanding the attention of the crowd which looks as though, like a wave, it may crash and overtake the speaker at any moment. This, of course, will not happen—that is the symbolic power which the stage commands.[36] But just as rank and boundaries among students are asserted here, they are also erased in moments of *communitas*—during the singing of the "Alma Mater," while watching *Dirty Dancing* under the stars, or as the identically-dressed graduates prepare to receive their degrees, "as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system—

[35]"Chihuly Sculpture Debuts at MHC," Mount Holyoke College, September 17, 2013, https://www.mtholyoke.edu/media/dale-chihuly-sculpture-debuts-at-mhc.

[36] Kertzer, 5.

in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands."[37] The amphitheater emphasizes difference in order to make its erasure, through moments of *being-with*, more profound.

The religious significance of College spaces is also not exclusively collegiate. Conventional religious spaces, such as Abbey Chapel, Abbey Interfaith Sanctuary, and Eliot House (the College's center for religious and spiritual life), share their formal function as worship spaces with hosting secular College traditions. Abbey Chapel hosts the Honor Code Ceremony, Baccalaureate, and musical performances. In the case of the Honor Code Ceremony, the Christian imagery and connotations of the space lend the ceremony moral authority—sitting in wooden pews in the echoing stone chamber, students hear the Honor Code pledge read from an actual pulpit. This comfortable coexistence of purpose serves to elevate, rather than reduce, the significance of all events in the space, having been imbued with the solemn attention of students for generations. Particularly considering the College's history of grounding its moral values in Christianity, the strategic invocation of these symbols ritually revives this connection, using Christianity as a shorthand for "serious," "binding," and "authoritative."

Holidays

One of the most robust elements of Mount Holyoke collegiate religion is its holiday observances. Distinct from traditions surrounding conventionally religious and United States public holidays, observances of Orientation, Mountain Day, May Day, Pangy Day, and

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[37] Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 513.

Commencement define the collegiate liturgical year, although the first and last of these apply only to first-years and seniors, respectively.

During the first hundred years of the College, student life was tightly regulated through a system of paternalistic rules dictating curfew, mandatory chapel attendance, dinner seating, work groups, and off-campus travel. These regulations both emerged from, and helped to sustain, a highly formal campus culture which influenced not only official College functions, but also student leisure activities. Student traditions from this period are notable for their evocation of strong class, dormitory, and other institutional identities, as well as their intense devotion to detail, which included the creation of costumes, songs, and other artwork specific to each occasion.

As social rules became more lenient, eventually to be abolished altogether, and changes in youth culture increased both connections between the College and neighboring towns and student mobility, campus culture became less formal, and many of these traditions faded. The College holidays which receive the greatest attention in my analysis are those that have endured these changes and maintained their relevance for contemporary students, establishing themselves as the standard to which the success of other campus traditions may be compared.

Rituals

If holidays determine the liturgical timeline of the collegiate religion, rituals are its practices. “Ritual” evokes the ringing of chapel bells on Mountain Day, or the songs of the Laurel Parade—however, there are also less formal practices which take on ritual qualities, and it is these practices which define the character of Mount Holyoke collegiate religion in daily life.

One of the first “solemn occasions” which Mount Holyoke students experience is the Honor Code ceremony. Its origins are somewhat nebulous–the Honor Code has existed in some form since the 1890s, but according to Honor Code Council members, their records only confirm the tradition beginning in 1995.[38] Held in Abbey Chapel during one of the first nights of Orientation, the Honor Code ceremony consists of speeches from faculty and staff reflecting on the meaning and significance of honor at Mount Holyoke, a serenade of special songs performed by the Glee Club, and a student procession down the aisles of Abbey Chapel to sign their names in a book, signifying their acceptance of the code and willingness to live by its rules.

Of the holiday ceremonies, the Laurel Parade is the most highly dramatized. Dating back to 1900, when the officers of the graduating class placed wreaths of laurel, symbolizing victory, on Mary Lyon’s grave, the Laurel Parade has become a rite of passage for all members of the graduating class. Dressed in white, both in a continuation of Mount Holyoke commencement tradition and as a symbol of solidarity with the Suffragettes of the early 20th century, graduating Seniors carry chains of laurel through a cheering crowd of alumnae from Mary Woolley Hall to Mary Lyon’s grave, wrapping the chains around the iron gates while singing “Bread and Roses,” a traditional labor union song, and the Mount Holyoke "Alma Mater."[39] This ceremony serves not only to honor the memory of Mary Lyon, but also functions as a rite of passage, marking the transition of the Seniors from students to alumnae.

More quotidian than the Laurel Parade is the ritual of ascending the Williston Library stairs. Examined in greater detail in Chapter 3, the staircase tradition is based on class year relations to College architecture. On each side of the double staircase in the Williston atrium

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[38] "How Old Is the Honor Code Ceremony?" e-mail to MHC Honor Code Council, 2017.

[39] “Contrast in Gowns.”

hang banners of four class mascots—the red pegasus, yellow sphinx, green gryphon, and blue lion.[40] Students who adhere to the tradition will ascend and descend only the staircase on the same side of the atrium as their class banner, with any error believed to result in either failing one's exams or not graduating in four years, depending on who one asks.

Sacred Texts

While the majority of the Mount Holyoke collegiate religion is defined by lore and practice, certain texts occupy a supporting role. Specifically, these are the Honor Code, the "Alma Mater" (and "Anti-Alma Mater"), and "Bread and Roses." The "Alma Mater" (and sometimes "Anti-Alma Mater") is always recited during Convocation and Commencement, though it is also a popular choice for Orientation, Mountain Day, Faculty Show, musical performances, and other events. The tone of both songs tends to be lighthearted and celebratory, though the "Alma Mater" ("Mount Holyoke, we pay thee *devotion*) is certainly the more reverent (vs "Mount Holyoke, we pay thee *tuition*) of the two. "Bread and Roses," by contrast, is exclusively sung at the Laurel Parade—while there are no rules preventing students from singing it at any other time, its only formal association with tradition is that event, and the symbolism of the two has become intertwined such that, in addition to laurel, many students also carry roses to bring to Mary Lyon's grave. All three songs are united by their communal element—regardless of their formality or seriousness, Mount Holyoke students must experience them together.

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[40] The purple pegasus, symbolizing Frances Perkins scholars is not represented in the staircase tradition. Frances Perkins students were not considered a distinct class group until 2015.

The Honor Code is a different case, because although it does have a ritual function as part of the Honor Code Ceremony, it is also a (socially, if not legally) binding document used to evaluate student conduct and enforce discipline. Its invocation carries tremendous weight, and unless a conduct issue arises, does not feature in many aspects student life beyond signing the agreement to follow the Honor Code which accompanies self-scheduled final examinations. Most students, however, will take several self-scheduled exams each semester, which cannot be accepted for grading unless the written acknowledgement is present, giving the Honor Code a practical, as well as moral, imperative.

Conclusion

Through examination of these categories, it is clear that the key elements of civil religion as defined by Bellah and Stephenson are both present and prominent within the context of Mount Holyoke College.

However, the direct application of this theory has certain drawbacks—namely that the differences between a college and a nation mean that the idea of civil religion serves a different purpose in these two contexts. For both Bellah and Rousseau, civil religion, while a sincere and legitimate system of beliefs and practices, is also unambiguously a tool of state control, mobilizing religious fervor to support state agendas. While these tactics are present within the context of Mount Holyoke, and the mobilization of tradition is a key feature in the College's marketing strategy towards prospective students and families, the nature of this argument is limited by its cynicism. Kertzer proposes an alternative reasoning for the success of civil religion. Rather than necessarily being a construction of the state, he argues that some form of civil religion is inevitable in any society. "People everywhere tend to sacralize their socio-

political environment. We feel uncomfortable in recognizing our society as merely the arbitrary product of cultural history…. Instead, we attribute cosmological meaning to our political order."[41] Civil religious ritual can also serve as a tool of resistance to this order—mass demonstrations in particular "are effective both in dramatically exhibiting a group's political strength and in fostering certain images regarding the nature of the group and its goals."[42]

This desire to elevate one's own society, or sacralize one's role in changing it, makes sense within the collegiate context as well, particularly with consideration of the age and life stage of the traditional college student. Given the power to be an architect of their own world with often unprecedented freedom, many students embrace the possibility of significance offered by participation in the College.

Thus, a key factor of the Mount Holyoke collegiate religion is its co-construction by students as well as administrators. Though the support and co-optation of student practices by the administration is a significant factor in the longevity of some traditions and practices over others, Bellah's theory does not allow adequate space for the complexity of the power dynamics and exchanges which take place between students and administration within the Mount Holyoke context.

Ritual and its functions

Having demonstrated the basic characteristics of Mount Holyoke practices as they fit within the civil religious model, the next step in my analysis is to examine more closely the specific types of ritual which comprise its most defining features. I define ritual as the

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[41] Kertzer, 37.

[42] Ibid, 119.

participatory element of Mount Holyoke collegiate religion—that which, when activated by time and place, is lived and enacted by students, administrators, and alumnae. Ritual not only deepens bonds of affect between students and their college community, but also cements communal identity through shared practice. I begin by discussing and synthesizing definitions of ritual put forth by Émile Durkheim and Victor Turner, followed by a closer look at the specific types of ritual which are relevant for the Mount Holyoke collegiate religion.

Ritual definitions

Émile Durkheim, writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, laid the groundwork for what would eventually become ritual studies. His observations and theories focused on Australian indigenous communities, and the ways in which they employed ritual to ensure group cohesion. His theories of "effervescence" and "solidarity" most clearly summarize his position on the function of ritual, although he does little to define or name "ritual" as such.

Rather than "ritual," Durkheim focuses on "rites," the understanding of which depends upon the duality of thought and action, which may be reimagined as sacred and profane, real and unreal, civilized and savage, or beliefs and rites.[43] Within Durkheim's model, "rites" must necessarily be "religious," and their proper execution requires belief in both the effectiveness of the rite and the system of which it is a part. His primary interest is how, precisely, group identities are formed through ritual—specifically through a process which he calls "effervescence." A result of ritual, effervescence describes the energy and heightened

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[43] Émile Durkheim, "Ritual, Magic, and the Sacred," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 190.

psychological state achieved by communal religious practice, which transports ritual actors from the realm of the profane to the sacred.[44]

Belief is a key element of this process—without it, rituals would be rendered both unnecessary and ineffective.[45] Because the effects of ritual in Durkheim's view are psychological, even a subconscious belief in ritual efficacy would suffice for them to be performed correctly. This is useful in explaining the longevity of both ritual as a category of human activity and specific ritual acts—one need not explicitly affirm their commitment to a ritual system in order to receive its benefits. In the collegiate religious context, this flexibility is essential to ritual success.

Victor Turner builds upon Durkheim's theory in his construction of liminality and *communitas.* Liminal places, persons, and events occupy the "betwixt and between" of a social order—"their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently linked to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon."[46] Liminal rituals include rites of passage, and the marking of change between one season and another. It is often, though not exclusively, within the context of liminality that *communitas* arises—unlike effervescence, *communitas* does

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[44] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York, NY: Free Press, 1995), 220.

[45] Durkheim, "Ritual, Magic, and the Sacred," 188.

[46] Turner, 512.

not serve to uphold or legitimize a social order, but is "...a matter of giving recognition to an essential generic human bond without which there could be *no* society."[47]

Frits Staal's 1979 article "The Meaninglessness of Ritual" offers a counterargument to both Durkheim and Turner. In his view, ritual exists not to affect or mark change, or to communicate information about social norms, but are merely a type of activity, governed by rules, that humans do for its own sake.[48] Refuting the traditional claim that "rituals are used, in preliterate societies, to transmit "cultural and social values" to the younger generation," Staal points out that:

> "Not only are rituals not confined to preliterate societies…; but such values (e.g., gods, myths, kinship systems) are most readily transmitted by grandmothers and through language, and there is no need for them to be transmitted again by other means. The only cultural values rituals transmit are rituals."[49]

From Staal's perspective, humans are always figuring out easier ways to do things, and there is no need to use a complex ritual to accomplish or communicate something that could be done by ordinary, non-ritual means. Because these non-ritual means exist, rituals must necessarily be both useless and meaningless- —societies would get along just fine without them.

Though logical, this understanding of Staal's theory presents an immediate problem: meaning, or usefulness, does not directly translate to significance, cultural worth, or sacredness. "Meaningless," in Staal's context, is not a value judgement, but a technical term. A "meaning" is a direct correlation of ritual to action or social knowledge of which the practitioners or observers of ritual are aware at the time that the ritual is performed. To adopt meaninglessness as an

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[47] Ibid, 513.

[48] Frits Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Rital," *Numen* 26, no. 1, 4, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3269623.

[49] Staal, 7-8.

understanding of ritual offers a pragmatic perspective: through meaninglessness, we can examine what "actually" happens when people engage in ritual without fussing too much about why they do it, or what it represents in the moment. Experiences of social unity, connection with ancestors, or celebratory boosts of morale, which other theorists would argue to be the purpose of ritual, are described by Staal as mere "side effects" of ritual action.[50]

I focus my argument primarily on Durkheim and Turner's understandings of "meaning," but Staal's concept of meaninglessness becomes particularly relevant when analyzing the lived experiences of ritual which I discuss in Chapter Three, navigating the slippery boundaries between sincerity, significance, and belief as they apply to Mount Holyoke traditions.

Types of ritual

Beyond its broad purposes, the issue of naming and categorizing ritual types is taken up by Catherine Bell. Influenced by Durkheim and others, Bell writes extensively on not only the functions, but also the inherent nature, of ritual, and problematizes the notion that ritual can be defined as any one "thing." Rather, she presents her own theories and questions as a "lightning rod" to attract the diverse schools of thought on this matter, ultimately arguing for the usefulness of ritual as an analytical category, which can be used to understand diverse aspects of society and human life.[51]

> "Ritual is a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces comes together. Examples include the ritual integration of belief and behavior, tradition and change, order and chaos, the individual and the group,

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[50] Staal, 11

[51] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 11.

> subjectivity and objectivity, nature and culture, the real and the imaginative ideal."[52]

Despite this invocation of duality, Bell approaches these ideas differently than Durkheim. She rejects his primacy of belief, and its necessary association with the "religious," although she builds upon his insistence on its social, communal function, stating that "ritual is the means by which individual perception and behavior are socially appropriated or conditioned."[53]

What is more significant than emphasizing the separation of thought and action, in Bell's view, is examining the ways in which they shape one another. Not abandoning the contributions of other theorists, she cites a useful method of reconciling binaristic tensions: "Most ritual theory avoids this by incorporating the notion of dialectic or synthesis: ritual is a dialectical means for the provisional convergence of those opposed forces whose interaction is seen to constitute culture in some form."[54] Bell also draws attention to the ways in which ritual mediates culture and is mediated by it: "It is this invisible process of 'homologization', driven by the implicit presence of an opposition between conceptual and behavioral categories, that begins to construct a persuasive and apparently logical body of discourse."[55]

The challenge of synthesizing these theories for the purposes of understanding Mount Holyoke is that neither Durkheim nor Bell seem to have anticipated the unique blending of secular and religious that occurs within the civil religious model. Durkheim's emphasis on ritual's connection to religion is useful in validating my theory, while his demand for "belief"

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[52]Ibid, 24.

[53] Ibid, 26.

[54]Ibid, 28.

[55]Ibid, 26.

undermines it, and Bell's argument for ritual as a social mediator does not sufficiently address its grasping at some form of sacredness. My understanding of ritual is influenced primarily by Bellian thought, which posits that ritual may be defined selectively as it is useful to understand particular cases, and that these definitions need not attempt to contain ritual in its myriad forms. Durkheim's effervescence and solidarity broadly capture the effect of Mount Holyoke ritual practices, whose aim is to build and strengthen the community.

The specific ritual types which feature most prominently in the Mount Holyoke Collegiate religion are seasonal observances, rites of passage, pilgrimage, performance, and daily ritual. All Mount Holyoke rituals are time-bound in some way, and reflect the passage of the academic year, a student's progress, or College history, but only Mountain Day and May Day/Pangy Day are specifically tied to the seasons, and acknowledge the natural world as a significant element of the collegiate religion. Rites of passage such as the Laurel Parade and Commencement are the most highly dramatized, representing the culmination of years of student effort, and the transition from one social status to another. The Laurel Parade also includes elements of pilgrimage, as does Mountain Day, crossing both geographical and symbolic borders to experience sacred space. Daily rituals, such as the Library staircase tradition, are seamlessly integrated into non-ritual life, require no special preparation, and may take only a few seconds to complete, as opposed to the intricate preparations involved in other collegiate religious practices. In much the same way as the ideal civil religion, they are part of the natural order of things.

Chapter Two

Communal Practice

> *"Those of our number who could sing resorted to a shadowed projection of rock and sang a few pieces of secular music. Here in the wildest orchestra of nature, our only accompanyment [sic] was the clear warbling of the mountain bird and our auditors, the solitary rocks and trees, while the deep bells below echoed a response." —Notebook entry by Lucy T. Goodale on the first Mountain Day, 1838.*[56]

> *"One girl who had on some former occasion developed an ability to crow like a roaster [sic] stood upon a chair dressed in a variegated colored kimona [sic], flapped her arms and crowed lustily while two other wound up in blankets with feather dusters attached at the correct angle shouldered each other in an imaginary cockfight." -MHC Alumna discussing her Senior Mountain Day, 1903*.[57]

"Community" may be Mount Holyoke's favorite word. The College does not have a dining hall, but rather a *dining commons and community center;* not residence advisors but

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[56] Linda Giannasi O'Connell, "When Mountain Day Was New," *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (1999).

[57] Typescript of speech "Mount Holyoke Traditions," 1903, Box 1, Mount Holyoke Traditions, Mount Holyoke College Archives, South Hadley, Massachusetts.

community advisors; not themed floors but *living-learning communities*. However interpreted, experienced, or critiqued by individuals, "the community" is a highly prized element of the College's identity, and ritual analysis offers one way to explore how "community" happens, how its members behave, and the narratives that it tells about itself. It is therefore natural that most Mount Holyoke traditions should be communal in some way. In this chapter, I have chosen to highlight four specific traditions which speak most clearly to this phenomenon, and to analyze how they affect students as a group. Their origins reach back to the Seminary years (at the latest, the 1920's), and by tracing their development over time through archival materials, I explore how they have been reinterpreted to maintain their relevance for nearly 200 years of cultural change, becoming established as the central pillars of the collegiate religion.

Mountain Day: Pilgrimage and Initiation

Mountain Day is one of the first holidays and sets of ritual observance of the academic liturgical year. It is also the oldest College observance besides Commencement, dating back officially to 1839, although student diaries indicate a possible similar practice as early as 1838. Lucy. T. Goodale, class of 1841, wrote of a morning in 1838: "On this delightful morning, while gray dawn yet lingered for the appearance of the king of day in the east, there was joy and gladness within the walls of Mount Holyoke Seminary, and the cheerful countenances, merry voices, and nimble steps of its inmates indicated a preparation for some joyous excursion." Goodale does not provide further detail on whether this "joyous excursion" resembled Mountain

Day in its current form, but nonetheless, its centrality within Mount Holyoke is long-established.[58]

The "delightful morning" for subsequent Mountain Days has been chosen by the President of the College.[59] On that day at seven o'clock, the clock tower bells ring seven times to mark the hour, and then continue roughly 100 more times. Between late September and early October, students listen with heightened attention to the morning bells—is it just seven 'o clock? Eight? As the number of chimes grows more incongruous with the hour, they transform from timekeeping to wake-up call: the campus is literally "ringing in" the holiday. This transition, and the suspension of normal time which it represents, is one of Turner's hallmark traits of liminality: the time structure around which all Mount Holyoke life is oriented has changed, and something exciting is about to happen.[60] On this day, all classes will be cancelled, and students are invited to spend their time climbing the College's namesake mountain.

The central ritual of Mountain Day is a civil pilgrimage. According to Barry Stephenson, a pilgrimage must be "a prolonged event, involving travel away from local territory, undertaken by many people, to a sacred place, as an act of devotion, informed by religious motives. …. The

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[58] Ibid

[59] The exact date is in theory kept secret, known only to the President, although intrepid students have exposed some deeper architecture involved in the planning of Mountain Day. This includes advance notice for the rangers of Skinner State Park and members of the Alumnae association in order to prepare for increased park traffic, and to coordinate refreshments and activities, respectively.

[60] Turner, 514.

journey is taxing upon the body, even potentially dangerous."[61] These criteria, which Stephenson aggregates from a variety of religious traditions, map easily onto the collegiate religion as well.

As a *prolonged event,* Mountain Day lasts an entire day, which is especially significant within the timescale of a college, in which hours and minutes are precious resources, allotted with great care to classes, meetings, athletics, and study. To value the Mountain Day journey above these most critical time-bound events, cancelling them largely without warning, speaks to its importance. *Travel away from local territory*, in this case of the College campus, easily fulfills the second criterion. Skinner State Park, which contains the mountain, is less than seven miles away from the College, and can be reached by car in a matter of minutes. In a ritual sense, however, this closeness is irrelevant—because the mountain is located outside of campus, which is contained as a distinct "territory," it is already outside the world in which Mount Holyoke students spend the majority of their time. And despite this closeness, the mountain is typically inaccessible to students—without a car, it would take at least one bus trip and nearly an hour of walking on non-pedestrian roads simply to reach the park. For collegiate religious purposes, the mountain is another kind of reality which, like the thinning of the veil on a solstice or equinox, becomes accessible only once a year. Because this opportunity is offered to (though not necessarily taken up by) the entire student body, it is undoubtedly undertaken by *many people*.

The destination of both the mountain and the Summit House at its peak is a *sacred place.* The mountain and Summit House may be considered sacred because, in Stephenson's terms, they are "fundamentally valued"—both College and mountain share a name which defines their

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[61] Stephenson, 98.

identity.[62] Beyond that, there need not be a reason for their importance—they simply *are* important. The ritual itself also serves to sacralize the space: without the yearly ritual engagement with the mountain, its significance for students would likely be in symbolism only, or relegated to the status of trivia. Or, to employ Durkheim's divisions of sacred and profane, they are sacred because they are separated, existing in opposition to the norms of the College.[63] The College is a built environment, structured, and imbued with labor and duty, whereas the mountain is a natural space, symbolically (though not actually) separate from society, and a space for leisure and enjoyment. The Summit House is symbolic of Mountain Day itself—currently closed for renovation, the building is closed to students save for restrooms and a porch. No specific event happens there, but it is the natural site of congregation for most students to observe, photograph, and be with the mountain and each other in the most basic type of performance: "behavior heightened, if ever so slightly, and publicly displayed."[64] As I explore later, Senior Mountain Day has a different relationship to both the Summit House and performance, but this function of the mountain and Summit House as sites of mutual witnessing exists in both cases.

The *religious motives* of the Mountain Day pilgrimage, within the collegiate religion, are the affirmation of the College's uniqueness, a release of tension as academic pressure begins to rise, and physical connection to College history. While other colleges, such as Smith and

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[62] Stephenson, 42.

[63] Durkheim, *Ritual, Magic, and the Sacred*, 189.

[64] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*. London: Routledge, 1993, 1.

Williams, have adopted their own variations of Mountain Day, it originated at Mount Holyoke, and is celebrated as one of the College's most beloved and successful traditions. Rituals of inversion, common across many cultures, temporarily and symbolically overturn the social order, allowing for frustrations, rivalries, and repressed desires to be expressed and harmlessly diverted (although they may also have the opposite effect of bringing these tensions to a tipping point). [65] By providing a spontaneous day of free time and physical exercise, Mountain Day tempers the tendencies of students to overwork themselves, and allows for physical, raucous, and exploratory play which would otherwise have few outlets for those who are not already athletes. Richard Schechner discusses the importance of play in ritual: like a ritual act, "… play creates its own (permeable) boundaries and realms: multiple realities that are slippery, porous, and full of creative lying and deceit."[66] In addition to its carefree nature, play is also a serious, though temporary, reconstruction of reality—on Mountain Day, the mountain becomes a stage on which the new, inverted reality is set. The fact that Mountain Day is the College's second-oldest tradition is also significant—with over 180 years of repetition, it has supreme status as a piece of cultural inheritance which any Mount Holyoke student may claim for themselves.

To climb a mountain is also, of course, *taxing upon the body.* Though the summit, at 940 feet, is not high, the steep, rocky path presents a physical challenge for even the most athletic students.[67] This challenge is central to defining the role of bodies on Mountain Day—in the mid-

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[65] Kertzer, 129.

[66] Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[67] "Joseph Allen Skinner and Mt. Holyoke Range State Parks." Skinner State Park. 2014. https://www.mass.gov/locations/skinner-state-park.

1800's, women's physical functions were generally constrained to reproduction and aesthetic adornment. Though great care was taken with appropriate and fashionable arrangements of hair, skirts, etc., the idea that there existed legs under those skirts that needed to be exercised was doubtless a radical innovation as part of seminary education. Other, less taxing alternatives to the climb have also been available throughout the tradition's history: the paved road which now leads to the summit was originally constructed by Amherst College students as a carriage path for Mount Holyoke students, a cable car once ran from the mountain's base, and today the College sponsors shuttles for those unable to make the ascent.[68] The exercise, however, has generally been welcome: as Harriet Lane wrote in 1853, "On we went with many a "dear me!" and "Are we there yet?"... [but] it is worth a little suffering to have one's soul expanded occasionally."[69]

After the conclusion of the mountaintop festivities, no parallel to the morning bells exists to mark the end of Mountain Day. Evening meetings and classes after four o'clock continue as scheduled, constituting a sharp return to normalcy, but for those with no evening commitments, that time becomes another liminal experience. Mountain Day, though centered on place, is equally about time—it is still Mountain Day whether one visits the mountain or not. Alumnae and students studying abroad take this idea to heart, taking the day off from work when possible,

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[68] Linda Giannasi O'Connell, "When Mountain Day Was New," *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (1999).

[69]Ibid

and gathering with other Mount Holyoke students for ice cream and a celebration of their shared connection to the College and its landscape.[70]

Mountain Day in its original form, however, marked the return to non-ritual life more clearly. Until 1929, each class year had its own Mountain Day, with Senior Mountain Day being the most highly anticipated due to its function not only as a pilgrimage, but also as a rite of passage which prepared the Seniors both for graduation and their life after Mount Holyoke.

In his discussion of liminality, Turner mentions Van Gennep's three stages which compose rites of passage: separation, margin (another term for liminality), and aggregation.[71] In the first stage, ritual participants are symbolically detached from a fixed point in the social structure, a set of cultural conditions, or both.[72] For the Senior class until 1929, this involved the donning of full regalia, and a horse-and-buggy cart ride to the base of Mount Holyoke. After a cable car ascension to the Summit House, the Seniors found themselves entirely secluded—they would have no contact with anyone outside of their class until the following morning. As Turner notes, "In initiations with a long period of seclusion, such as the circumcision rites of many tribal societies or induction into secret societies, there is often a rich proliferation of liminal symbols."[73] In this case, the publicly-known symbols of the mountain and regalia mark the Seniors' rank and institutional affiliation, and lend their significance to frame another symbol:

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[70] "Mountain Day Alumnae Reunions," MHC Alumnae Association | Mount Holyoke College, 2017, https://alumnae.mtholyoke.edu/events-programs/mountain-day-alumnae-reunions/.

[71] Turner, 512.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid, 513.

the "senior nightie." Senior nighties, made by members of the Sophomore class for the sole purpose of use during Senior Mountain Day, were special nightgowns which could only be worn again after the Seniors were married. It was in these nighties that the Seniors held their rite: the final class meeting.

The class meeting comprises the second stage of initiation- —liminality. As previously discussed, in a liminal state, "the characteristics of the ritual subject… are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state."[74] These attributes of liminality, including absence of status, uniform clothing, *communitas*, and foolishness also characterize the class meeting.[75] The meeting, facilitated by the class officers, was an all-night affair including dinner and a show, during which students performed "stunts," which could be any passably interesting talent, performance, or story. "The Stunt committee gather[ed] together all these accomplished people and plan[ned] a program for the evening which [included] everything in this line which has delighted the class at former gatherings."[76] These

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[74] Ibid, 512.

[75] Ibid

[76] "Mount Holyoke Traditions," 1903. The stunts, like other aspects of Mount Holyoke tradition, reflected their times, and not always for the better. Stunts from the class of 1907 included excerpts from "the minstrel show," and were considered entertaining and acceptable. This is one of few records indicating explicitly racialized elements of Mount Holyoke tradition, although the school's history as an all-white, and subsequently primarily white, institution has surely shaped other aspects of these traditions in unrecorded ways. While a full examination of Mount Holyoke's racial history is beyond the scope of this project, I do not intend to let it pass unnoted.

performances were sometimes quite rowdy, as illustrated by the "imaginary cockfight" described at the beginning of this chapter.

Here, concerns for propriety and status are entirely disregarded—the dignity which the Seniors will soon display for graduation, and perhaps the anxiety which accompanies that moment, has no place in these playful performances. Through a shared embodiment and the reenactment of their own history, *communitas* intensifies the bond between classmates, aware that this will be one of the last moments in which everyone who shares their knowledge and experience will be together in such a close, connected setting. The Senior nighties in particular call attention to this fact—the significance of the friendship between classmates privileges their gaze as one that can be matched only by future husbands, putting their friendship on par with the marital bond. This gaze was not only symbolic, but engaging in it was an activity in itself—according to a 1925 newspaper article, "the inspection and admiration of nighties delayed going to bed for a long time."[77]

The height of the evening's festivities, appropriately, was the "guilty/not guilty" roll call.

> "There, at a midnight conclave, attired in fascinating draperies,[78] designated "senior nighties" cunningly wrought by the deft fingers of sophomores to be worn

[77] "Senior Rites on Mountain Shrouded in Secrecy," *Mount Holyoke News* (South Hadley), June 5, 1925.

[78] The exact appearance of these "fascinating draperies" is unclear- photos of "senior nighties" from 1915 show plain white gowns and bonnets, which were standard for their time, so one may assume that this refers to the costumes worn for stunt performers, or that the Seniors preferred the secrecy of the nightgowns not to be compromised by photography. See Appendix B.

> only on this especial occasion and never again until their marriage, they will answer "Guilty!" or "Not guilty!" to the roll-call. "Guilty" constitutes a confession that the nightie will not long remain unused, since it stands for Engaged."[79]

"Many answer guilty, some are already married, and some even pregnant."[80]

For these Seniors, graduation was not the only milestone which loomed in the near future. According to the archival sources, Senior Mountain Day served equally as preparation for marriage. The "guilt" to which many confessed was not the fact of their engagement or marriage itself, which would have been socially valorized and celebrated, but a premature departure from the girlish world of their classmates, and the roll call offered a ritual apology to the friends they had, in one way or another, left behind. It also served as a means to sniff out secret betrayal—"those suspected of foreign entanglements but failing to confess were given a mock trial."[81]

Throughout this liminal process, *communitas* and *community* happen together. Turner quotes Martin Buber's observation of communal moments: "this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from *I* to *thou*."[82] As the Seniors move towards their "one goal" of departing Mount Holyoke through graduation and/or marriage, they engage in playful, intimate, and connected ways with one another, connecting the *I* and *thou*.

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[79] Typescript of notes "College Customs and Superstitions," 1923, Box 1, Mount Holyoke Traditions, Mount Holyoke College Archives, South Hadley, Massachusetts.

[80] Typescript of speech given by Florence Clement, 1952, Box 1, Mount Holyoke Traditions, Mount Holyoke College Archives, South Hadley, Massachusetts.

[81] "Commencement Festivities," *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly*, 1922.

[82] Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Fontana, 1961), 51. In Turner, 518.

In the final stage of aggregation, the Seniors depart their initiatory space to rejoin the College.

> "After the final banquet … automobile trucks carried them all back again to the senior steps on the east side of Skinner Hall. There they found their underclass friends, together with the early arrivals among the alumnae and seniors' families, waiting to greet them and eager to hear their mountain songs in celebration of the festivities just enjoyed."[83]

Embraced by their families, alumnae, and other students, the Seniors have completed the rite of passage, and are ritually prepared to take on a new role as graduates with emotional debts settled, tensions released, and communal bonds affirmed.

Though the last Senior Mountain Day took place in 1928, with the class of 1929 opting for "campus comforts," contemporary Mountain Day festivities echo its disruption of time, liminality, and performative qualities.[84] Senior Mountain Day also adds weight to its history—and the ritual pilgrimage recalls memories of the students who made the journey before.

May day and Pangy Day: Symbols and Power

Not all rituals involve the dramatic kinds of liminality and unity present in Mountain Day. Some rituals enforce or accentuate difference through the manipulation of symbols, and control of these symbols affects power dynamics both within and outside the ritual sphere. The process of transition from May Day to Pangy Day at Mount Holyoke demonstrates these negotiations: as symbols which initially represented hierarchy within the collegiate religion were

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[83] "Commencement Festivities," 1922.

[84] "How sensible a younger generation!" "Tradition Broken," *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly*, July 1929.

contested, reclaimed, and transformed, the structure of spring celebrations became more relaxed, open, and reflective of changing College and youth culture.

Whereas Mountain Day is the crowning celebration of the fall semester, May Day and Pangy Day herald the spring. Drawing from traditional English folk observances of the spring equinox, some form of May Day at Mount Holyoke was a standard observance from 1898 to 1967, although celebrations often spanned multiple days, and involved different events each year.[85] Festivities included the selection of a May Queen (the most beautiful senior) and her court by class vote, a pageant performed in their honor, a maypole dance, and a theatrical performance unrelated to the pageant. In 1983, Pangy Day began to fill the void left by the decline of May Day, retaining some themes and practices of May Day and introducing environmental, communal, and feminist themes.

Although it was a popular celebration for much of Mount Holyoke's history, there is no mention of May Day in archival materials after the mid-1960s.[86] Several years passed without notable spring celebrations until the inauguration of College President Elizabeth Kennan in 1978. Accompanied by tremendous festivities, Kennan's arrival brought with it a new wave of

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[85]"Notes re. Mountain Day et al, compiled by Jennifer Allison '81," 1979, Box 1, Mount Holyoke Traditions, Mount Holyoke College Archives, South Hadley, Massachusetts.

[86]Despite extensive archival information on May Day and Pangy Day, including programs, letters, and student newspapers, I could find no mention of the reasons for the end of May Day, or indications of particular reasons why students or administrators may have chosen not to observe it.

optimism and community feeling on campus, which some students sought to continue through the establishment of a new campus holiday: "Pangynaskeia."

May Day, like other early Mount Holyoke traditions, reflected the rigid structure which determined both daily activities and the nature of interclass relations on campus. Each class had specific symbols and activities which were its exclusive right—as summarized by a 1909 article in *Congregational and Christian World:*

> "On a certain day in May, each year, Mt. Holyoke College seniors lay aside their dignity, for a time, and indulge in rope-jumping, and on the following day the fun-loving juniors merrily spin their tops.
>
> This year the white-clad seniors, in academic cap and gown, with dark green jump ropes festooned between each couple, marched through the grove, singing as they went a catchy song written for the occasion.
>
> ...the sophomore class president and vice-president bestowed golden jonquils [daffodils] on each senior as she passed...
>
> Next afternoon the juniors assembled in front of the music building near the south campus, all in white lawn dresses with flowing Red Riding Hood capes and with red roses in their hair. President and vice-president, bearing trailing festoons of roses, led the line across the south campus, carrying out effective marching maneuvers. The bright red and white costumes were strikingly effective against the velvety green of the spacious lawn.
>
> Singing their "spinning song" the class gathered in front of the chapel and soon the little red tops were busily humming all along the walls, furnishing no little entertainment to the members of the college and the guests gathered to look on."

For Seniors, the symbolic aspect of this May Day is a straightforward inversion: the humorous clash of their "dignified" cap and gown, and the white dresses which are also associated with the Laurel Parade, with leaping, singing, and playing with flowers and jump-ropes both asserts their status and temporarily frees them from its responsibilities. They behave childishly because they have earned it, and members of other classes must either affirm their rank by bestowing gifts on the seniors, as the sophomores do in offering flowers of their own class color, or simply observe. Despite the entertainment value of watching the seniors make fools of themselves, participation in the actual festivities was tightly restricted: younger students would simply have to accept their

place and wait their turn. Even the ropes themselves, in dark green, matched the class color of 1909.

The juniors, unencumbered by the wardrobe limitations of cap and gown, took a more flamboyant approach to their color: red capes, hair decorations, and “trailing festoons” of red roses were doubtless “very effective” at communicating their class identity in contrast to the others. Though a certain amount of decorum was expected of all students, the juniors had considerably less of their image at stake than the seniors. And although they had to wait for their own day to express it, they seem to have had considerably more freedom to be theatrical in their marching, singing, costumes, and engagement with onlookers. White gowns connected their rank to the seniors, while their own class symbols celebrated an understanding that they need not define themselves solely in connection to others—being a junior was itself a proud and desirable state.

Although sophomores had only a token involvement in the festivities, their lot was better than that of the first years, who are the only class not mentioned in the *Congregational and Christian World* article. The reason is simple: they were forbidden to participate either in rope-jumping or top-spinning, except as onlookers.[87] The events for the juniors and seniors were not only celebrations of their own progress, but an active exclusion of underclassmen in order to give their status added significance. This was much to the chagrin of the first-years, who understood that, as Kertzer put it, “Creating a symbol or, more commonly, identifying oneself with a popular

[87] "When I Say Jump...," *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (1997).

symbol can be a potent means of gaining and keeping power, for the hallmark of power is the construction of reality."[88] Eventually fed up with watching from the sidelines,

> "The first class to trespass upon this sacred rite, supposedly belonging entirely to the upper classmen, was 1917, in its freshman year. Since then the freshman classes have considered it a challenge and if they have not been successful the first time in bringing out hoops, marbles, or balloons, have tried again in their sophomore year."[89]

This freshman intervention did not serve to overturn the ritual order (the seniors-only tradition continued until 1920), but established a place for first-years within it, with symbols that directly challenged the seniors and juniors.[90] While juniors and seniors each had one primary symbol involved in their tradition, first-years had an abundance of symbols. The upper class traditions were planned, orderly, and eagerly anticipated, while the first-years were spontaneous, chaotic, and disrupted the choreographed ritual flow. Although, according to the article, this attempt at disruption seems to have been only occasionally successful, the fighting spirit persisted through successive groups of first-years until an interclass "Play Day" was formed in 1921.[91]

The author's use of "sacred" reflects the zeal with which each class guarded its claims to its treasured privileges. Leisure time, an eternally scarce resource at Mount Holyoke, required certain status to be experienced, and the freshmen, who had not yet earned the right to waste time, were barred from participation in the May Day festivities of the upper classes. Yet, as this piece reflects, these restrictions only worked when they were accepted, and the class of 1917

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[88] Kertzer, 5.

[89] "Precedent Set by 1917"

[90] "When I Say Jump…"

[91] Ibid.

ushered in a new era of campus-wide festivities through their refusal to accept their class limitations. Their resistance to arbitrary restriction, eagerness to face challenges, and competition helped to push the future of May Day in new directions. The only tradition left unchanged in its class specificity was the selection of the May Queen and her court, which remained the exclusive purview of the Senior class until its abolishment.

The May Pageant and maypole dance were also sources of symbolism, representing both class hierarchies and the May celebration itself. The May Queen, to whom the pageant was dedicated, was "the most beautiful senior," chosen by class vote. Her symbols included not only the standard gown, crown, flowers, and entourage, but a specific type of body: she had to be a brunette if graduating in an odd year, and a blonde in an even year. No archival sources elaborated on the logic behind this order, but, like other symbols, it was more than arbitrary. In addition to representing a gendered body ideal in which light-colored hair represented feminine beauty, it was also racialized: black hair, and thus the hair of many students of color, was automatically disqualified from the College's conception of beauty.

Symbols of the pageant itself varied from year to year, but, particularly in early years, evoked the pagan traditions of ancient England, Greece, and Rome. Unlike rope-jumping and the May Queen selection, the pageant did not limit participation to upperclassmen. The class of 1917 would also have been content to know that they were permitted to join the maypole dance—whether dressed as fairies or in bright spring colors, a small group of students performed for the others each year.

Pangy Day, by contrast, was created in order to foster a spirit of unification, not only between current Mount Holyoke students, but also with alumnae and future students as well. Its festivities were structured to foster maximum participation through parades featuring floats by

each residence hall and class year, picnics, a campus-wide assembly, and conversations between alumnae, professors, and students.[92] The parade and academic discussions, which defined Pangy Day in its early years, no longer feature in the festivities, and archival sources did not indicate a date or reason for their disappearance.

“Pangynaskia," a Greek word referring roughly to the "total world of women," was one of the original names proposed by Mary Lyon for Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Through its use, students sought to emphasize the communal spirit of campus, and to celebrate and link "Mount Holyoke women past, present, and future."[93] With its parades and picnics, the first observances of Pangy Day had little relation to the original May Day celebrations. However, as the Pagan/Wiccan Collective (PWC) was established in the early 2000's, students who drew religious significance from the observation of May Day saw an opportunity to re-incorporate some of its original Pagan aspects. Various environmental coalitions from within Mount Holyoke laid the groundwork for this evolution through their connection of Pangy day to Earth Day, and the PWC, with its interest in unifying nature and religion, happily bridged that gap. As the PWC became more involved, the maypole dance was restored to its traditional status (with the stipulation that the pole itself would be much larger, and anyone would be allowed to participate) and various seasonal celebrations, such as flower-crown making, interactions with

[92] "The PANGYNASKEIA Parade," The PANGYNASKEIA Planning Committee to All Departments, Offices, Dorms and Student Organizations, April 13, 1982, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA.

[93] "The PANGYNASKEIA Parade"

animals, and nature-based artistic projects became dominating features of Pangy Day, drawing it more closely to its May Day predecessor.

The defining element of the first Pangy Day celebrations was the Pangynaskeia Parade, featuring floats and costumes created by students to convey both residence hall spirit and various points in Mount Holyoke history, accompanied by creative and flamboyant displays of class colors. Discussing the parade for an interview in the Mount Holyoke News in 1983, one student predicted: “It’s not going to rain. It’s going to be sunny and beautiful, and the perfect kick-off for spring weekend.”[94] Their prediction came true, and subsequent years of (sometimes unseasonably) perfect weather on Pangy Day have come to be known as the “Pangy miracle,” eternally allowing at least part of the Pangy festivities to take place outside.

Although there are numerous scheduled events on Pangy Day, whether or not to attend is left up to individual students—a radical inversion of the hierarchical structure present in May Day. The connection between the two is recognized on the official Mount Holyoke blog, which describes Pangy Day as “part Earth Day, part May Day, part spring-fever-inspired hootenanny.”[95]

Like Mountain Day, May Day and Pangy Day use seasonal markers and connection to the landscape to step out of ordinary routines and celebrate the student body. Though some student bodies, as demonstrated by the may queen, have been more valorized than others, reflecting the systems of privilege operative within the college, we also see trends towards

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[94] Marg Stark, "Pangynaskeia Plans," *Mount Holyoke News* (South Hadley), March 17, 1983.

[95] Mount Holyoke College. "Gettin' Pangy with It." The Gates Blog. April 26, 2017. https://blog.mtholyoke.edu/thegates/gettin-pangy-with-it.

greater inclusiveness as body, age, and class barriers to participation are lifted. As the values of Mount Holyoke students have changed, they have been reflected in traditions. The creation of the collegiate religion by students is part of what allows it to live—through adaptation, core ritual observances continue to manifest in relevant ways.

The Laurel Parade: Embodied Initiation

The Commencement exercises for the graduating class of 2018 at Mount Holyoke include 57 events in the five-day period leading up to the final moments when students cross the amphitheater stage to receive their diplomas. These exercises span a wide range, and include administrative formalities, induction into honors societies, and recognition of specific groups, such as LGBTQ students and students of color. Some events are fairly generic, and some so specific to student organizations, sports teams, or other small groups that they have little relevance for a general understanding of Mount Holyoke Commencement. The key theme of all these practices is that the pre-commencement week is a time of heavy ritualization, and it is this context within which the Laurel Parade must be situated in order to appreciate its significance. While every aspect of commencement is designed to recognize and facilitate the transition of Seniors out of their undergraduate career, the Laurel Parade is one of the last ritual acts which all members of a class perform together. The Baccalaureate speeches, for which the class will also gather, include a student procession and wearing of graduation regalia, but the event itself is more passive, dedicated to reflection and the receiving of wisdom rather than action by the students.

The ceremonial march and laying of laurel at Mary Lyon's grave began midway through Mount Holyoke's history, with the class of 1900 presenting two wreaths of mountain laurel.[96] According to a 1965 article in *The Springfield Republican,*

> "What happened to the laurel in 1901 is a mystery but an account in the Springfield Union on June 17, 1902, shows that the laurel wreaths had now lengthened into a chain. 'The various seniors dressed in white, without caps and gowns, were led by their president and vice-president… and marched in twos, singing their class song and carrying a beautiful garland of mountain laurel made by the freshmen.'"[97]

This basic structure of the procession of the Senior class, white dresses, laurel chains, and singing of songs remains much the same in present-day Laurel Parades, with one practical change:

> "By [1934] the graduating classes had reached the two hundreds. It seemed less than reverent to have all two hundred odd milling about inside the iron railing of Mary Lyon's grave, so the laurel chain was wound from the outside. The class of 1936 got a little confused in their twining and included the nearby trees in their laurel chain. However, numerous notes to the succeeding class presidents have reduced the tradition into a diagramed science. Seniors stand eight feet apart when taking up the laurel chain on their shoulders. Then they step one foot forward so that the ivy dips evenly between each row of girls."[98]

As with other traditions, the chain assumed various forms to meet the needs of each class:

> "Originally, the chain was made of laurel hand-picked by freshman, but when mountain laurel became scarce, the chain was made out of daisies or ribbon, and was eventually obtained from a florist at the expense of the freshman class. .... In 1970, the senior class voted to carry signs protesting the Vietnam war rather than

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[96]Virginia Robertson, "Laurel Chain Is Tradition at Mount Holyoke College," *The Springfield Republican*, May 31, 1965.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid.

> bear the laurel chain. They donated the funds that would normally have been spent on the chain to a summer program for disadvantaged girls."[99]

As with Mountain Day and May Day celebrations, underclass students historically assumed a supporting role in the Laurel Parade, producing ritual objects for seniors' use. Unlike their exclusion from May Day, however, in this case (and likely with the senior nighties as well) the assembly of the laurel chain is likely a labor of love. Especially considering the small class sizes in the early years of the College, with the first Laurel Parade involving only 22 students, the bonds between members of different classes were undoubtedly close and affectionate. It seems reasonable to conclude that at least some first-years would have enjoyed the opportunity to do something kind for their friends and mentors, and the seniors would carry forth not only the chain, but also the friendship and support which had produced it.

The symbolism of processing in white dresses, carrying flowers and greenery, and music together, like the senior nighties, is unmistakably bridal, and serves the same purpose of preparation for students' assumed married life after Mount Holyoke. While most students today would likely argue that the wearing of white is now done only for tradition's sake, those symbols remain relevant for mainstream American culture. Whether it be graduation, marriage, moving, or the beginning of new careers, a key feature of the Laurel Parade is that it does not only signify itself: as one of the class' final moments together, it celebrates all that the seniors will accomplish in the future, celebrating these milestones as though they have already happened.

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[99] Jennifer Loomer and Katherine Underwood, "Laurel Chain: A Solemn Parade into the Future," Traditions: Laurel Parade, 2003. https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hatlas/traditions/parade.html.

These different connotations of white dresses have also been a source of tension—suffragette history, while an unquestionably formative part of the women's rights movement in the United States, was also marred by racism, and the association of white and whiteness with femininity is a troubling one, particularly for students of color and students who do not identify as female. The choice of suffragette students to embrace “Bread and Roses” in addition to their traditional dress signifies a willingness to embrace (or at least, recognize) a multiplicity of voices in their movement. The Lawrence, or “Bread and Roses,” strike, represented the interests of working-class immigrants, particularly women, and for many promised “the reconstruction of coalitions which could appeal to largely disfranchised immigrant and minority groups.”[100] Archival sources did not indicate when this song became integrated into the Laurel Parade, but its political history would have been well-known in Massachusetts. This tradition has also been a site for inventiveness–International students often use the Laurel parade as an opportunity to wear a white version of their traditional clothing, marking themselves as belonging not merely through sameness, but also by validation of the contributions that they bring with their difference.

Within the collegiate religion of Mount Holyoke, the Laurel Parade functions as pilgrimage and initiation. Drawing once again from Stephenson’s conception of pilgrimage, the criteria for destination, distance, magnitude, and motivation are fully present in this rite: the destination, Mary Lyon’s grave, is undeniably sacred as the resting place of Mount Holyoke’s most prominent civil religious figure; the parade crosses the institutional and generational

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[100] Mark Robbins, “Bread, Roses, and other possibilities: the 1912 Lawrence textile strike in historical memory,” Historical Journal of Massachusetts, 2012.

boundaries of students and alumnae; the entire senior class participates; the motivation for the rite is devotion to Mary Lyon, recognition of Seniors as full members of a new Mount Holyoke community, and appreciation of the last shared moment between the entire class before graduation.[101]

The Laurel Parade is not the only opportunity for Seniors to formally gain recognition as part of the alumnae community—many groups, such as Lyon's Pride, a network for LGBTQ alumnae, are open to students at any stage in their careers, and the Alumnae Association hosts a yearly "Strawberries and Champagne" event to induct Seniors as members. The status of "alumna" is flexible—one need not be a graduate in order to operate as part of the alumnae community, and yet it is only in conjunction with graduate status that the title can be fully held. Both statuses are markers of institutional affiliation, but one has a greater collegiate religious weight: alumnae status signals group belonging, as opposed to graduate status, which represents an ostensibly individual achievement.

Conclusion

Mountain Day, May Day/Pangy Day, and the Laurel Parade represent the essentially communal character of ritual in the Mount Holyoke collegiate religion. The most significant events of the collegiate religious year—those which are the most eagerly anticipated, highly choreographed, well-attended, and best-funded, are the ones that students experience together. These experiences can be open and equitable, or emphasize status differences. Both serve

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[101] I explore the sacred qualities of Mary Lyon's grave further in Chapter 3, in my discussion with the PWC.

important purposes—students who have spent years working towards their degrees earn a measure of distinction from the others, and have unique ritual needs as they prepare for the next stages in their lives. For younger students, the focus is on successful integration into the social order, after which point they develop the ritual language both to participate in accordance with and challenge their subordinate position. Their coexistence is more or less harmonious, in part, due to symbols and practices of belonging which are accessible to all students, which ultimately reinforce the message that, no matter one's position, all students are part of the College community.

Chapter Three

Interpreting Tradition

Whereas Chapter Two established the foundation of Mount Holyoke tradition, this chapter will examine how contemporary students have received this ritual framework and developed their own contribution to the collegiate religion. Building on themes of performance and space present in the older traditions, contemporary practices prioritize engagement with space over the passage of time, specifically by connecting students to their architectural environment. The qualitative data in this section comes from ethnographic research with members of the Mount Holyoke community, both staff and students, gathered through interviews and tours in both individual and group format, presented in a narrative style interspersed with more formal ritual analysis. These conversations not only provide technical details on new traditions, but also illustrate a sample of the multiple individual interpretations and experiences of college-wide practices.

Tours: building the brand

"Our past was somebody else's present, and our present will be someone else's past." —Nabeeha Noor, '20, tour guide

The first way that many students are exposed to the Mount Holyoke collegiate religion is through tours conducted by the Office of Admissions, and it is through a tour that I begin my exploration of contemporary practice. I sought to answer the following: what role does tradition play in the construction of Mount Holyoke's commercial self-image? Which traditions are

highlighted, and which are ignored? What do these messages say about the Mount Holyoke Collegiate religion?

My tour, on a chilly February morning, included four families of prospective students, and was, by coincidence, led by my friend Nabeeha. Nabeeha was aware of my project and included additional information about tradition for my benefit—my aim as a participant-observer in this experience was not to secretly infiltrate a generic tour and analyze a "pure," unfiltered experience. A large part of the tour process is the guide's attunement to the interests of their group, and I was more interested in the combination of what would naturally occur, and how the agenda of the Admissions office might be visible, in the differences between how traditions were presented and my own experience.

We began with an immediate dive into Mount Holyoke history. As we left the Admissions building, Nabeeha offered the group a short history of the College's founding quite similar to the one presented in Chapter One. Stressing the significance of Mary Lyon creating something new and radical, the central message of our tour was already clear: Mount Holyoke is a special place—rooted, though not buried, in its history. This theme continued as we entered the first building, Dwight Hall, and during a tour of the Mediated Educational Workspace, we stopped to examine an Archives exhibit. A description of the campus computer systems was quickly followed by details about the architecture of the Reading Room (modeled after Westminster Hall in the United Kingdom), and the meaning behind the Mount Holyoke seal (an "oasis of learning"). Upon exiting the Reading Room we arrived at the Atrium staircase—the site of one of the College's most popular traditions. On either side of the double staircase hang banners associated with each class's color and animal—if students go down the stairs on the same side as their class banner, they would receive good luck. Nabeeha was careful to emphasize

that "it's not bad luck [not to do it], it's just the absence of good luck," but admitted that she had never gone down the wrong stairs, just to be safe.

Making our way outside, Nabeeha had the group pause in front of the library to admire the view of the central tower. Though not officially part of the tour, she said, she wanted us to take a moment to appreciate one of her favorite campus views. From there we explored the science building and laboratories, discussed graduation requirements and academics, and as we left the building, another tradition: the first-year plant. Every new student is given a plant from the greenhouse, and if they can keep it alive, Nabeeha said that they would either "pass their exams with flying colors or get a million dollars." She also shared with us a story about her first-year plant, and how it had propagated dozens of smaller plants. By giving the offshoots to friends and family, she said, she was able to share part of her Mount Holyoke experience with her loved ones.

The next stop on our tour was the Gettell Amphitheater—the place where students spend their first night at Mount Holyoke watching Dirty Dancing, the day before classes at Convocation, and their last moments on campus at Commencement. As Nabeeha observed, you start on one side of the stage as a student, and leave the other side as an alumna: the space holds an immense transformative significance.

After a visit to the Dining Commons and Safford common room, discussing details of the meal plan and residential life, the tour came to a close. Having marked the campus by its architecture and history, we returned to the starting point in the Admissions office.

The admissions tour provides an excellent snapshot, not only of new College rituals, but their institutional applications through marketing, and a detailed description of how a particular

student views her participation in the Mount Holyoke tradition. Just as Nabeeha propagated her aloe plant, her tour propagated the Mount Holyoke collegiate religion. By devoting nearly half of the tour to discussion of tradition, as opposed to student groups, athletics, or scholarships, she demonstrated the emphasis which Admissions places on the specialness of Mount Holyoke and its ritual—within the precious hour that prospective students have traveled far to experience, there was ample space dedicated to establishing campus culture through tradition, marking it not only as a necessary aspect of Mount Holyoke culture for prospective students to understand, but as an indispensable marketing point.

One of the specific aspects of contemporary practice which this tour highlights is ritual relationship to space. The physical movement of the tour group through the campus, as a performative mini-pilgrimage, brought prospective students' bodies to places where, as members of the community, they would one day have to comport themselves in ritual ways. By inviting prospective students to calculate their graduation year and participate in the staircase tradition for themselves, the process of ritual participation through deliberate movement in space began. By looking up at the Williston Library tower, and down into the amphitheater, the tour offered two perspectives on Mount Holyoke space. Standing at the base of the century-old tower, which no student may enter, the visual magnitude of the building emphasized the power, history, and larger-than-life image of the College which the tour hoped to inspire. Looking down into the amphitheater from the top offered an opposite experience—the site of numerous events throughout the academic year, passed through on ritual and mundane occasions alike, prospective students had a chance to imagine themselves in that space, and what their participation would look like in the many ritual moments that occur there.

These, of course, are not the only significant spaces in the Mount Holyoke collegiate religion, and nor are the traditions highlighted on the tour the only ones which are relevant to contemporary students. However, they do serve to illustrate one narrative and set of experiences that may be drawn out of the collegiate religion, and introduce practices which students continue to negotiate on a day-to-day basis.

Traditions

Due to their popularity and invocation in daily life, I took a particular interest in the library staircase and first-year plant traditions, interviewing three Mount Holyoke staff members to gain their perspective on how these practices have evolved over time. Unlike the traditions discussed in Chapter Two (with the exception of Pangy Day), these originated within the living memory of current staff, some of whom I asked specifically about how and why these traditions originated. This is especially relevant given their more magical nature—unlike earlier traditions which marked and affected positive transformation, the library staircase and first-year plants present ritual danger if not handled correctly.

Library staircase

For greater insight into the library staircase tradition, I interviewed two Library, Information, and Technology Services (LITS) staff members, Sarah and Ajay. I began by asking them to describe the tradition in their own words.

Sarah said that she was routinely confused about “whether [walking down the wrong stairs means] you’ll fail your exams or not graduate,” though she was sure that both were popular interpretations, and that one must be dominant over the other, though she was not sure which.

Ajay also told me that the tradition had to do with some kind of academic failure. This represents a dramatic shift from the reward-oriented interpretation offered by Nabeeha on the tour: rather than a general promise of good luck, failure to correctly perform the staircase ritual carries a threat of ultimate failure.

Both participants felt the origin of the tradition to be hazy—Sarah offered the closest guess for a date, putting it at some time after 2006, as she had friends who graduated in 2006 who had not yet started the tradition. Compared to the 180-year old tradition of Mountain Day, a twelve-year old tradition is still in its infancy by Mount Holyoke standards. And yet, it has already reached the level of importance where prospective students are (however jokingly) instructed to observe it. Sarah cited the frequent turnover of students as part of the reason that the tradition has become so influential: it feels as though it has always been a part of the campus culture because the generations within the College are so short. Twelve years may not be a long time, but it is enough for twelve groups of several hundred students to graduate, and the same number to arrive, passing the tradition through thousands of new students, who themselves quickly become the wise bearers of knowledge for the first-years. This may also explain the lack of information about who exactly started the tradition—both Sarah and Ajay did not notice it until it was already long-established, and had attained its mythic power.

Besides the construction of the closest thing to a historical narrative that may be reasonably developed about the library stairs, my conversations with Sarah and Ajay revealed that each had a fascinatingly opposite interpretation of what the tradition signified about Mount Holyoke culture.

At some point after the tradition had become established, the class banners in the atrium were taken down for cleaning. Sarah said that students would ask her about where the banners

had gone, and which side of the stairs was the "right" one for them, incessantly, both in person and on the "Ask LITS" dry-erase board near her office. Though to her it was a trivial issue, Sarah admired the students' dedication, and felt that those who approached her were embodying Mount Holyoke values by having the confidence to assert their needs, make a case for why what they wanted was important, and get results—the librarians eventually put up temporary signs on the stairs to facilitate adherence to the tradition. Sarah felt that it was important for Mount Holyoke to teach women how to ask for what they want and get things done themselves, and that this case represented the successful accomplishment of that goal.

Ajay took a different perspective on students' fierce adherence to the tradition: he found it surprising that, at an institution dedicated to teaching critical thinking, students would put so much stock into a superstition. Tours such as Nabeeha's, which highlight the staircase tradition, represent a form of exploitation, literally selling Mount Holyoke and its traditions by playing on students' anxieties about performing the tradition incorrectly. Parents, according to Ajay, buy into the seriousness with which students treat the staircase as part of the school's image, often calculating their own graduation years so as not to violate the tradition, even though neither they or their children are actually current students who would be affected by it either way. The stress and pressure to participate created by the suggestion of punishment are neither healthy nor productive, and serve only to perpetuate the practice for its own sake.

Ajay's dissatisfaction with the staircase tradition points to what could be considered a deeper critique of the Mount Holyoke collegiate religion in general: the prevalence of tradition in every aspect of student life, even at the level of architecture, defines Mount Holyoke as a social, rather than an academic, institution. Indeed, besides portending academic doom, or celebrating success in the case of Commencement, Mount Holyoke traditions have little to do with

scholarship at all. Rather than making College values and practices intelligible, this tradition takes two relatively straightforward ideas—academic studies and ascending a staircase—and mystifies them. The library is an access point for success not because of its books, expert librarians, or study spaces, but because it enshrines a powerful collegiate religious site.[102]

The same critique may be leveled against the first-year plant tradition. Though Nabeeha offered a lighthearted view of its implications, much like the library stairs, the common understanding among students is much darker: if your first-year plant dies, you will not graduate in four years. I interviewed Jimmy Gorgan, manager of the Talcott Greenhouse and first-year plants, for his take on the tradition and its implications.

First-year plants

The practice of giving small plants to first-year students, according to Jimmy,[103] began in the early 1970's as a way for the Botanic Garden to establish a connection with every student. Jimmy described the plants as an "offering from the greenhouse," and an invitation to engage further over the course of students' careers. As with the library stairs, the specific originator of the tradition is unknown, but it has remained consistently popular—as far as Jimmy could tell, every first-year student, and some upper-class students, participate in the tradition each year.

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[102] Embodiment also has some relevance here. To have a tradition which revolves around a staircase presumes a certain type of body which can comfortably use it, making this tradition both symbolically and literally inaccessible for many.

[103]Coroborated by an article on the Mount Holyoke College website: https://www.mtholyoke.edu/media/mhcs-firstie-plants-21st-centur

Some lose their plants, and others inevitably die, and Greenhouse staff account for this loss by propagating more plants than the first-year students will need. Jimmy stressed the importance of access in this process: any student who wanted a plant should be able to get one. From his perspective, the true purpose of the plants was to serve as a point of connection to the Greenhouse, which need not be limited to one moment in a students' career.

When I mentioned the superstition surrounding first-year plants and inquired if students ever ask the Greenhouse staff about what will happen if they die, Jimmy told me that no one ever asked him directly, but that he knew about the tradition because tour guides mention it to prospective students when their groups pass his office. Unlike my tour, some groups did visit the Greenhouse proper, and some guides did mention the possible negative consequences of failing to care for a plant. As for his own perspective on the efficacy of the tradition, he said that "it cracks us up a little bit," but that any grander consequences were not part of how he or others conceived of the tradition or their role in it.

Like Sarah and Ajay, Jimmy also offered his own theorizing on the institutional role of Mount Holyoke (specifically the Greenhouse) in the collegiate religion and its relationship to student culture. A recent article on the Mount Holyoke website about the first-year plants referred to them as "firstie plants"—terminology which struck him as unusual. The article was his first introduction to the term "firstie," and he was surprised that it had been employed by the article's author, a Mount Holyoke staff member. Although he found the term a bit "cute," (more juvenile and familiar than one might expect to describe new students), he noted that the article represented an instance of strengthening the tradition through language, using a specific term with the intention of making new students feel like "part of our tribe." As Jimmy rightly noted, "firstie" is a term that students have long used to refer to each other, and its adoption in an

institutional format, specifically the naming of a tradition, canonizes and preserves student culture. Here the reciprocal relationship between subject and power, as evident in the staircase tradition, and addressed in my critique of Bellah becomes evident: though students did not create the first-year plant tradition, their ownership of it through practice and language talks back to the institution and changes the tradition itself.

The ritual element involved in the care of first-year plants is less obvious than the library staircase. There are no special steps needed to care for the plants, and presumably, students do not reflect on their significance every time they water or gaze upon them. Sometimes a plant is just a plant, or stairs are just a means of getting from one floor to another: it is precisely through the daily, unconscious engagement with these traditions that they become a different kind of quotidian ritual. Unlike Mountain Day, Pangy Day, and the Laurel Parade, which derive their significance through exceptionality, these traditions are the rituals of everyday—a sustained element which maintains the relevance of tradition throughout the academic year. Their concern with individual success and failure, even when performed for the community as in the case of the tour, provides opportunities to experience the collegiate religion in normal space and time—one cannot always be in a state of *communitas*, and the collegiate religion does not fail to provide other options for engagement in between communal ritual moments.

The PWC and collective imagination

Though staff interviews illuminate the perspectives of those who maintain the structures keeping Mount Holyoke tradition intact, they do not ultimately represent the experiences of students themselves. One group whose insight has particular relevance to this project is the Mount Holyoke Pagan/Wiccan Collective, or “PWC.” While members of all religions negotiate

its role in their lives, and living traditions are constantly adapting, Pagan and Neopagan groups participate in some of the most visible constructions of novel religious systems. It is common and acceptable in many Pagan circles to synthesize, invent, reimagine, and adapt symbols and traditions relevant to the interests and practices of particular individuals, and it is through this lens, combined with the students' experience at Mount Holyoke, that I sought to explore further the "religious" element of collegiate religion. Would this group find opportunities to make Rousseau's cosmic significance relevant in the collegiate religion? Could students experience the collegiate religion in a deliberately "religious" way? And more broadly, how do these students interpret Mount Holyoke traditions for themselves? Despite ambivalence or outright rejection of many specific traditions, the PWC ultimately concluded that Mount Holyoke tradition (and thus the collegiate religion) does have a deeply significant effect on their experiences as students and the campus culture—according to an interviewee who I record as "9," "Mount Holyoke 100% is a cult."

I conducted this interview after one of the PWC's regular meetings—I had been invited to a Yule ritual before our interview, and following the service, we began with introductions. All members elected to conduct the interview anonymously—names have been replaced with numbers for their privacy. PWC members describe themselves as "The Pagan, Wiccan, and Earth-Based Spirituality Collective," or "PWC" for brevity. (None of the members I spoke with identify as Wiccan). The group aims to be as inclusive as possible of any practices fitting within that umbrella, and some members expressed an aversion to specifically Wiccan practices, owing both to the semi-closed nature of the tradition, and its inconsistency with their interests. Their traditions derive largely from Celtic practices, and include rituals, tarot readings, divination, astrology, and other practices from members' areas of interest. Most importantly, they stressed

the group's main purpose as a learning space: "most pagans tend to build their own paths in some way, and having a learning group is really important."

Before we began our discussion in earnest, I asked the PWC to define two key terms for their practice which are not conventionally part of the discourse on civil religion: magic and spirituality. The purpose of these definitions for my analysis is not only to clarify points made in the interview, but to compare them to other aspects of collegiate religion and ritual theory to identify areas where the same ideas or experiences might be addressed in different language.

> 7: "Magic is controlled, manifested intention. Anything done with intention is magic…. I could go bang pots and pans in the parking lot and call it magic, and it would be just as valid as what we do here, or some coven with lots of money and ancient traditions."
>
> 9: "For me there's… the fairytale kind of magic, and then the manifestation."

In keeping with the openness of the group, these definitions are both extremely broad, with the unifying element being controlled, manifested intention, which can be applied and used however the members saw fit.

The second term that we discussed was spirituality.

> 9: "For me the thing is that it's the term that I use as opposed to religion… religion in my mind is very monotheistic, very structured, and spirituality to me worships not necessarily a deity, but more nature in general, and everything that falls outside the realm of religion."
>
> 8: "Spirituality kind of has a closer relationship with me, rather than going through something else…religion to me is through the church, whereas spirituality is my conversation with whatever god…"
>
> 7: "I see spirituality and religion as the same thing…. it's more like religion is ... the structured thing, but spirituality is me doing whatever I want, talking to whatever deities I want to or need to"

These quotes offer three different understandings of what spirituality is. For 9, it is an opposite to religion, and everything that that person associates with it. 7 views spirituality as not related to

religion, but to deities, and connection to a greater power or energy beyond oneself, while 8 emphasized spirituality as being about personal experience outside of the structure of the church. All three at other points in our discussion referenced the Christian church specifically as the basis for, or contrast to, their interpretations.

After our discussion of these two terms, members offered a third: a definition of witchcraft itself.

> 7: "Witchcraft is not a religion, or a spirituality, it's a practice. Anyone of any religion can practice witchcraft…. There's even secular witches."

Having established our core terms, I asked the PWC about specific traditions, including the library stairs and first-year plants, and how they viewed them as students and as magical practitioners. On the library stairs, most members agreed that, while they did not necessarily take the tradition literally, as 7 stated, "people part with their friends [to avoid violating it]… It's just been done so many times that there's something there." 9 used the language of "manifestation" to describe the tradition—through its repetition and adherence by students, it acquires significance, though that significance might not be the same as its stated purpose. All of the PWC members, however, participated regardless of whether or not it had a real effect on students' academic performance. While discussing the tradition's efficacy, 6 offered a creative spin: "If you walk up and down the [wrong] stairs you fail your finals… just spend all your time walking up and down the right stairs!" The logic being, in that case, that repeatedly doing the correct action could produce positive effects, as opposed to avoiding negative effects.

In response to the first-year plant tradition, 7 said "First year plants are bullshit—no one can keep those shits alive," and others agreed. Another strike against spiritual potential.

One Mount Holyoke tradition over which the PWC has direct influence is the May Pole on Pangy Day. I asked the PWC how they viewed their leadership of this tradition—the general feeling was that, while it could be a significant spiritual event, it would need to be done differently. It is ‘not the way I’ve ever celebrated solstice,” according to 9, and according to 7:

> “I saw it as a logistical nightmare. The maypole dance is a thing people take time to learn, there’s s not that time on Pangy day, we could do it better, to give it bigger significance, we could change it, but right now it’s just a time to get tangled up in some ribbons and have a good time.”

Members were similarly ambivalent about the figure of Mary Lyon: rather than a legendary figure, 9 described her as “like a mascot… you founded this place, you’re a cool [lady].” Their feelings regarding Lyon’s grave, however, were very different: 7 described her grave as “a sacred space.” This began a conversation about what qualities designate that space as sacred: though “it would be less important if it was a random grave… it’s not the grave of Jesus. It’s just the grave of an important person who we respect, and we respect graves in general,” according to 9. We also discussed the site’s location as establishing a sense of sacredness: its placement on a hill, surrounded by a gate, and marked by a large stone monument physically and symbolically set the grave apart from the rest of campus. Already designated as significant because it is a burial ground, it is a space to be entered only on significant occasions. One member suggested that, if Mary Lyon does continue to have a spiritual power and presence at Mount Holyoke, it is contained in that site because the institution has changed so much since she founded it—“Mary Lyon did not see [the PWC] coming.” Students have also turned to Lyon’s grave to invoke the symbol of her power—7 recounted a story from the fall of 2017 in which:

> “A number of Mount Holyoke students, in desperation to celebrate our beloved Mountain Day, burned some undergarments on Mary Lyon’s grave… someone actually printed out laser-cut bra shapes for people who didn’t want to actually burn their expensive brassieres in an attempt to summon Mountain Day. Unfortunately

> it didn't work because someone rudely called [campus police] to punish us for having fun."

Though I have addressed them in largely serious terms, and the PWC stresses their respect for the grave, many Mount Holyoke rituals center on this kind of playful, humorous element. The 2017 bra-burning exemplifies a contemporary take on student relationship to space, mixing the symbolism of feminism, Mary Lyon, and Mount Holyoke itself in this practice.

The formal ritual that many members cited as having what they felt to be the closest to a spiritual mood was their Honor Code ceremony. Citing many of the elements discussed in Chapter Two, 6 noted: "[it] could be experienced as an initiation, it feels a lot like that, it was in the chapel, we had the speeches, they give us the nice pretty book, you sign in the [other] book that everyone before you have signed in.. the book [that you sign] almost feels sacred because of the history." After her Honor Code ceremony, 9 said "My friends and I were like, welcome to the cult." On a more serious note, she explained the importance of the Honor Code ceremony coming at the end of Orientation: "Abbey Chapel was very ceremonious, and everything leading up to that was you getting the tools to step into the role that you've been placed into." When a student comes to participate in the Honor Code ceremony, they are ready to participate fully in the community as Mount Holyoke students—"convocation and O101[104] had a similar feel—very

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[104]"O101," or "Orientation 101," is an event in which Orientation leaders perform a series of skits for the new students. These skits cover the social aspects of college life not necessarily addressed in other parts of Orientation, including fashion, social media drama, stereotypes about each of the colleges in the Five-College Consortium, writing emails, dating, and the "MoHo chop"—the trend in which students cut their hair short (often associated with a queer or feminist awakening) during their first year.

much the community accepting you...the rest of the school saying that we are the ones that came before you, and we accept you, and want you here, and we are happy." 6 agreed: after two weeks spent devoted entirely to the new first-years and their new community, the Honor Code ceremony marked the joining of an established community.

At this point, the PWC took a broader view of the significance of Mount Holyoke traditions. 7 remarked, "While I haven't experienced it myself, there's a lot of specialness surrounding the graduation ceremonies, MHC is one of the most complex [in its graduation ritual] … with history and repetition things gain power, [and] with complexity there's intention…. You don't just light a lantern and row across the lake on a whim, that's very organized."[105] I asked 7 if their use of "intention" was the same in this case as in their earlier definition of magic, and they said that it was. They described Mount Holyoke traditions as having a sacramental element: "every step of the way [through college] there's traditions to mark it, and I feel like that does have a significance."

I noticed at this point that there had been a dramatic shift in the way that the PWC was discussing these traditions, as opposed to the library staircase and first plants. Rather than dismissal of the silliness of blindly following a superstition, they were now discussing deep significance and their sense of community belonging which had been shaped by Mount Holyoke ritual. I asked members if they felt that the type of experiences they described could fit within the realm of spiritual experience, or could be advertised as such. They were unanimous in their opposition to this idea: while 7 suggested that PWC members might be the most likely to view

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[105] This statement refers to "Canoe Sing," another Commencement tradition in which students paddle canoes, illuminated by paper lanterns, on to Lower Lake and perform favorite songs.

Mount Holyoke traditions as spiritual because they are in the mindset of looking for opportunities to transform the mundane, the reason that traditions have such a powerful effect is because they are left open to interpretation. According to 6, “the problem with trying to make [tradition] spiritual is that it feels forced.” 9 elaborated on this idea: she described an experience of going to church because her father had wanted her to. Though she was present and participated in the service, she pushed against it. “If that happens for a community, it loses its spirituality—you end up at a negative middle ground where you’re not getting [the point of a practice].” This is also a key aspect of civil and collegiate religion: both rely on a careful balance of enough ceremony and religious symbolism that they feel significant, but not so much that they become repellent and ineffective.

Returning to my original questions before this interview, we see through this discussion that these students hold complex views regarding Mount Holyoke traditions. Here Staal’s work becomes useful: from the perspective of the Pagan/Wiccan Collective, these rituals are meaningless, but not insignificant. The PWC members I interviewed did not believe that the library stairs or first-year plants had any effects on their academic performance, but still participated in those traditions. Rather than demanding an examination of who believes what about ritual efficacy, meaninglessness renders the question of belief irrelevant. One of the challenges of collegiate religion as I have constructed it is that it is something in which everyone participates, whether they intend to or not, which makes the likelihood of sincere or conscious belief in a ritual’s “meaning” unlikely. And although the collegiate religion constitutes part of the appeal of Mount Holyoke, as evidenced by the tour, we may safely assume that students do not choose to attend because they wish to participate (or are even aware of the existence of) a structured civil religious environment.

Conclusion

College in general, and Mount Holyoke in particular, is often described as a “bubble.” Many a sobering remark begins with “in the real world…,” or “once you leave Mount Holyoke…” “….you won’t be able to talk/dress/act like that.” Perceptions of colleges as places of affluent youthful experimentation, free from consequences, and constantly in flux contribute to an image of college students as sheltered and inauthentic, and their experiences as less “real” than those of others outside the institutional sphere. These ideas certainly reflect collegiate norms, and the barriers to access which favor certain privileged demographics. What they fail to do, however, is recognize that the qualities which make colleges “bubbles” are also simply those that make them different from other places. If colleges are “bubbles,” so too are elementary schools, rural villages, city blocks, or military bases. An able-bodied, straight factory worker in Wyoming who has not been exposed to the theory of intersectionality and a disabled lesbian academic in Massachusetts who has never experienced rural poverty might mutually dismiss one another as out-of-touch. Whose perspective on the “real world” wins?

Through this project I have sought to take one college and its students seriously as a setting in and for which “real life”—in this case, “real ritual”—happens, and as a relevant religious environment where meanings are made and identities are constructed. As I have demonstrated, there are many kinds of Mount Holyoke students, whose experiences within and beyond the College gates shape their ritual structure. These rituals actualize the abstract value of “community” through specific communal and individual practices, affirming group identities in ways that do not merely imitate or resemble familiar patterns of religious practice, but which interact with one another in a coherent system with its own logic and boundaries. The reasons

(however interpreted) that Mount Holyoke is a "bubble" are precisely what form its collegiate religion, and which I use to understand the very real processes of growth and group formation which happen within its borders.

Collegiate religion shifts the ways in which we understand college life outside of the strictly rational spheres of grades, academics, ratings, and employment, and frames the structures, narratives, images, and practices of a college's students and administrators in terms of symbolism, sacredness, and ritual. As part of *The Social Contract*, Jean Jacques Rousseau developed "civil religion"—a similar theory which sought to sacralize Enlightenment-era governments by appealing to citizens' religious sensibilities for its imperatives to civil duty, morality, and cosmic significance. While Rousseau's was a carefully constructed political project, intended for top-down use as a tool of national propaganda, both David Kertzer and Robert Bellah examine how ordinary citizens naturally possess a desire to sacralize their own way of life, thus demonstrating that the civil religion is actually generated organically across many strata of society. The same principle operates in the collegiate religion, where both "citizens" (students) and "government" (administration) develop symbols and traditions that establish their identity as Mount Holyoke students both within and outside the College, embodiment of social ideals, and connection to documented and mythic history. Though developed by different people, in different times, and for different reasons, the traditions of Mount Holyoke College form a cohesive system in which legendary figures, historical narratives, monuments and sacred spaces, holidays, and sacred texts enhance and support one another. Of these categories, ritual is the most substantive, and receives the most attention in my analysis. Because it does not, as Émile Durkheim would argue, require any particular beliefs about its meaning or efficaciousness, ritual is the ideal vehicle for the collegiate religion, unifying

students through shared practice, the broader significance of which is left up to the interpretation of individuals. Welcoming without being generic, and substantive without being dogmatic, the collegiate religion strikes a delicate balance between meaning and practice which allows it to integrate seamlessly into the broader collegiate environment.

My argument centers on establishing the claim that the collegiate religion at Mount Holyoke exists, and identifying its general goals and consequences both historically and in the present. This means that I have had to make strategic choices about which aspects of College traditions to highlight and which to exclude from my analysis. Relevant areas of inquiry which must be reserved for future projects include, firstly, an exhaustive history of all traditions at Mount Holyoke. For this thesis, it is sufficient to note that tradition plays a large role in many aspects of College life, not only those that I have identified. Secondly, I do not analyze in depth all of the broader systems of power and oppression which exist within Mount Holyoke, and the implications of the College's participation in exclusionary, violent, or morally dubious systems for student wellbeing. While I have noted what I feel to be the most relevant instances of conscious and unconscious discrimination against marginalized students in these traditions, the examples that I have chosen to discuss are by no means the most important for understanding these issues. I recognize and take seriously the potential for a project such as this one to overly praise and propagandize an institution which operates with social interest just like any other, particularly in my dealings with gender and archival sources. The history of a traditionally women's college calls for a queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming revisioniong, which would no doubt transform the ways in which gendered traditions may be understood. To retain something of Rousseau's original construction of civil religion, however, I am interested in what knowledges the "state" (in my case, the administration) of the College produces, canonizes, and

disseminates, and how it achieves its goals. Before a critical response to these knowledges and norms can be fully articulated in collegiate religious terms, the collegiate religion itself must be established as a basis for that response. I also do not argue that these traditions are, on the whole, inherently oppressive— the aspiration towards a mutually supportive College community is a noble one, although both historic and contemporary students and leaders may have had limited notions of who that community might include. If I have done my job correctly, I have demonstrated that traditions evolve and respond to student needs, and that one of the distinguishing features of the collegiate religion is that students choose which traditions they find useful and recoverable, and that student agency has always shaped its direction. The last area which I leave generally unexamined is academics: assignments, classes, and professors receive little attention in this thesis. This is due to the trends in the available archival information: the most prominent Mount Holyoke traditions simply have not dealt substantively with this dimension of College life, but to place social and academic traditions in conversation with one another would be a fascinating area of future inquiry. Lastly, my vision of collegiate religion is shaped in great part by the fact of Mount Holyoke's gendered history, as well as its status as a private institution. The application of this theory to co-education and public schools would require different interpretive strategies, and engagement with different histories, and this is a door that I leave open to further exploration.

The traditions which I have examined: the Mountain Day pilgrimage, May Day and Pangy Day manipulation of symbols, the Laurel Parade initiation, and personal practices of the Library stairs and sustaining a first-year plant illuminate the diverse forms of ritual which exist at Mount Holyoke. As practices unique to the College, representing both the oldest and newest ritual innovations, and (theoretically) open to all students, they serve not only as standards of

longevity and success for other traditions, but represent the primary tools by which the collegiate religion achieves its aims of establishing community, valorizing College uniqueness, and enforcing norms of student behavior. To return to a quotation from Robert Bellah in Chapter 1, "What people say on solemn occasions need not be taken at face value, but it is often indicative of deep-seated values and commitments that are not made explicit in the course of everyday life."[106] In this case, it is what people *do* both on "solemn occasions" and in the everyday that renders the College identity intelligible.

By understanding the forms that ritual takes at Mount Holyoke, I hope to expand conventional understandings of what religion, ritual, and college education mean for their participants, troubling the boundaries between rational and non-rational, intellectual and embodied, and religious and secular which pervade academic institutions. The conversation which emerges between archival, theoretical, and ethnographic sources is complex and lively, revealing a deep significance and love of tradition within the College. As Rousseau acknowledged, the cold rationality of a democratic government cannot hope to satisfy the needs for significance, connection, and meaning which all humans carry with them—how much less so could these deep questions be answered by academics alone? Whether through Mary Lyon's Christian fervor or collegiate religious ritual, for Mount Holyoke students, this significance is constructed through ritual, which serves a purpose just as "real" as any other.

[106] Bellah, 41.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Mary Lyon Burial

Whether or not Mary Lyon is truly buried beneath the marble monument on campus has been a popular source of controversy since at least the 1930's. Primary sources in the Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections confirm that her funeral service was held in South Hadley, and that she is interred on the College property. The following are explicit references to Lyon's burial found in the Archives. All sources were found in Box 11 of the "Student Traditions" collection.

Archive From a newspaper article, date unknown, though accompanied by a note which states "Evidently printed soon after her death in 1849."

> Title: Mary Lyon
>
> "[Lyon's] mortal remains rest in the burying-ground in sight of the beloved Seminary for which she spent the best part of her life. The trustees of the Institution have very properly yielded to the request of many pupils to allow her tombstone to be erected by the contributions of those who owe her so much. But the seminary itself is her monument."

From a newspaper article, date unknown. Found in the same box as "Mary Lyon," and the tone of the article indicates that it was also written very shortly after her death. The inscription referenced on her grave here is accurate.

> Title: Miss Mary Lyon
>
> "A neat monument, located in the centre of the grounds, bears this appropriate inscription:
>
> MARY LYON, the founder of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, and for twelve years its Principal. A teacher for thirty-five years, and of more than three thousand pupils. Born Feb. 28, 1797; died March 5, 1849."

From a newspaper article, *The Evangelist,* "The One Hundredth Birthday of Miss Mary Lyon," January 21, 1897.

> "Down in a beautiful grove south of the first building, under a marble monument, sleeps the busy worker to whose untiring love and care the College owes its existence, and on one side of the monument is the fitting inscription, "Give to her the work of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates."

From a newspaper article, *The Mount Holyoke News*, "Documents Prove Mary Lyon Rests on Campus: Discredits Recent Rumor." By Sydney R McLean, May 9, 1936.

> “Funeral services were held on March 8 at the village church… After the services ended, “the long procession moved to the grave,” as the recorder in [The Seminary Journal] wrote. “This,” she continued, “is on the seminary grounds a little south of the orchard. It can be distinctly seen from most of the rooms on that side of the building.”
> The orchard has gone. The old building burned in 1896; Mary Lyon Hall stands on its side. But the monument, erected some months after the burial, is in the grove above Pageant Field and that monument is not a cenotaph. It marks the grave. Mary Lyon rests where she belongs, here at the center of her College.”

The Archives possess multiple copies of *The Shining Path: a sermon preached in South Hadley, at the funeral of Miss Mary Lyon, March 8, 1849.* The sermon was published, and evidently very popular—Amherst College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst also have copies in their collections.

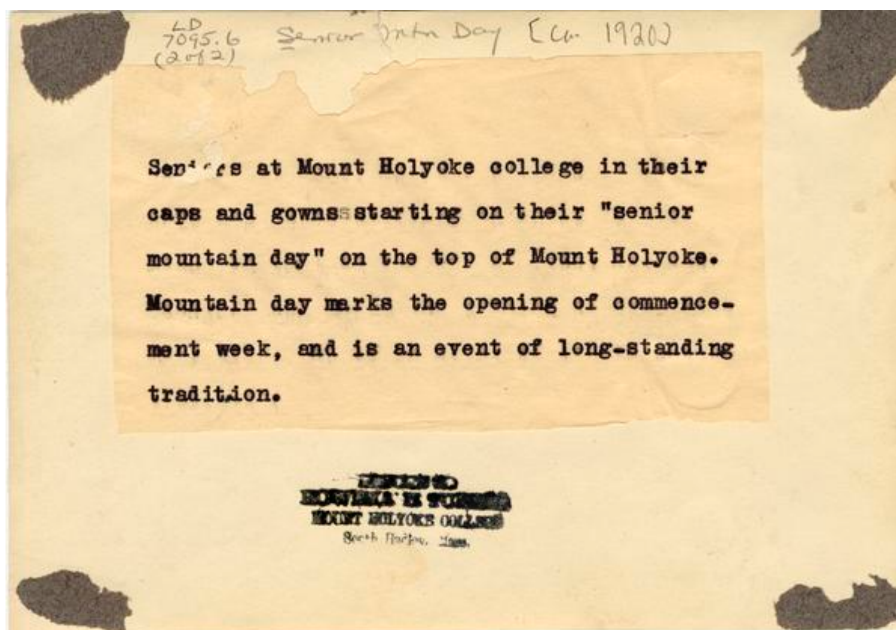
Appendix B

Senior Mountain Day

Seniors from the class of 1915 on Mountain Day in their "senior nighties"[107]

Senior Mountain Day, 1920 (Front)

[107] "Senior Mountain Day, 1915," Senior Mountain Day Nighties, 2003, https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hatlas/traditions/nightiesbig.htm.



LD 7095.6 (2 of 2) Senior Mtn Day [ca. 1920]

Sen[illegible]rs at Mount Holyoke college in their caps and gowns starting on their "senior mountain day" on the top of Mount Holyoke. Mountain day marks the opening of commencement week, and is an event of long-standing tradition.

Senior Mountain Day, 1920 (Back)[108]

Senior Mountain Day, 1912[109]

[108] *Senior Mountain Day 1920*, 1920, Student Organizations Records, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, https://compass.fivecolleges.edu/object/mtholyoke:19090.

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