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Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and Thomas M. Kelly

Identity and the Processes of Identification

An Introduction

Ronald A. Simkins, Creighton University

2015 has been called the “Year We Obsessed Over Identity,” with numerous public and cultural events challenging conceptions of race, gender, religion, reputation, and other forms of identity (Morris). Among the most notable examples: Bruce Jenner, the former Olympic gold-medal winner of the decathlon, changed his sexual identity to Caitlyn; Rachel Dolezal, the biological daughter of two white parents, claimed to be black; and Ben Affleck tried to cover up the discovery on the PBS series “Finding Your Roots” that a southern ancestor on his mother’s side owned slaves. Identity, it seems, is quite malleable, flexible, and self-determined.

And this is the problem: identity has come to be used in practice for any and every form of self-understanding. Identity, as a category of practice used by people to make sense of themselves and what they share with others, is perhaps too malleable and fluid to be a useful category of analysis. “Conceptualizing all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understandings and self-

identifications in the idiom of ‘identity’ saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary” (Brubaker and Cooper: 2). When identity can mean everything, it ends up meaning nothing and fails as a category of analysis. Moreover, as a category of analysis, the use of “identity” risks confusing the multiple and diverse ways in which identity is used in practice, and reproducing and reinforcing the reification of such identities.

To move past this problem with identity, Brubaker and Cooper suggest unpacking its many meanings by using several “less congested” concepts, such as “identification,” “categorization,” and “self-understanding.” As analytical concepts, these terms lack the reifying tendency of “identity” and draw attention to the processes by which identities are formed. Whereas identity is a category of practice, used by people to express their affiliations and self-understandings, the analysis of such practice is more productive when the focus is on the processes of identification. By distinguishing between identity as a practice and its analysis, using different categories, we are better able to clarify the multiple and even contradictory uses to which identity is put.

For example, “evangelical” is a particularly difficult identity for analysis in part because the breadth and content of the identity is rather fluid. Social science researchers have typically identified evangelicals through self-identification or denominational affiliation, and this can become particularly messy when correlated with political demographics. This has led some to argue that evangelicals are inconsistently identified in research. As a result, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) has sought to define evangelicals in terms of belief rather than other forms of identity. That is, the NAE has developed a series of four theological statements to which a person must strongly agree to be considered an evangelical. As the NAE president Leith Anderson notes, “Evangelicals are people of faith and should be defined by their beliefs, not by their politics or race” (quoted in NAE).

This understanding of evangelical identity, however, has several peculiar results. On the one hand, African American Protestants are overwhelming evangelical in their beliefs, but only 25% identify themselves as evangelical. On the other hand, 41% of those self-identified as evangelicals do not strongly agree with the so-called evangelical beliefs. In contrast, 23% of Catholics strongly agree with the evangelical beliefs (see Smietana). Although the NAE has sought to aid researchers through an accurate and consistent way of defining evangelicals, it seems that their definition only further muddies the evangelical waters. Should not the rejection of evangelical identity by the 75% of African American Protestants who share “evangelical” beliefs be considered significant? Can this definition be sufficient when nearly a quarter of Catholics also qualify as evangelical? These are some of the problems faced when a category of practice, “evangelical” in this case, also becomes a category of analysis. Nevertheless, it is significant that a large group of evangelicals, arguably the power brokers within the tradition, have sought to define “evangelical” in terms of the exclusive strong acceptance of certain beliefs.

This brings us to the case of Larycia Hawkins. A tenured professor of political science at Wheaton College (an evangelical liberal arts college in Illinois, not to be confused with the college of same name in Massachusetts), Hawkins stirred the murky waters of evangelical identity through an “embodied solidarity” with Muslims. Faced with growing anti-Muslim

speech and actions following the mass-murder of 14 people by a Muslim couple in San Bernardino, California, on December 2, 2015, Hawkins announced on her Facebook page:

I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God . . .

As part of my Advent Worship, I will wear the hijab to work at Wheaton College, to play in Chi-town, in the airport and on the airplane to my home state that initiated one of the first anti-Sharia laws (read: unconstitutional and Islamophobic), and at church (December 10, 2015).

For Hawkins, her evangelical identity is expressed through a behavior that embodies her beliefs. As she reflected a few days later:

My motivation is to demonstrate Christ's love during a time of profound marginalization of our Muslim brothers and sisters. I act out of my love for Jesus and His call for me to love all my neighbors . . . We want to be very clear: the love of Christ compels us. As we celebrate His birth, we are reminded of the ways Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, far and near. Christmas celebrates God's embodied, loving commitment to all of humanity. And I'm praying that this Christmas season will be one where our hearts are opened to love others more, where we learn to see people the way Jesus sees them – with embrace and love.

For the administrators of Wheaton College, however, evangelical identity is defined by belief, which is expressed through a series of theological propositions. Although Hawkins has affirmed Wheaton's Statement of Faith and her behavior and speech have not contradicted it, her statements nevertheless do not readily conform to the administrators' rather essentialist understanding of evangelical identity. The provost has subsequently suspended her from teaching and initiated procedures for dismissal. Her case has not yet been resolved at the time of writing.

The case of Larycia Hawkins illustrates the difficulty of understanding the relationship between identity and, in this case, religion when identity itself is the category of analysis. It offers us little more than competing claims to the same identity. When the analysis focuses on the processes by which such identities are claimed or formed, the analysis can be more productive. In Hawkins case, we are thus able to discern two distinct understandings of what it means to be evangelical, one that assents to a fixed set of beliefs and one that embodies (complementary) beliefs in a behavior expressed towards others. In practice, both are labeled evangelical, but the analysis uncovers the difference in the labels.

The essays included in this volume on religion and identity address the many ways in which religion and identity interact, whether it is the formation of a specific religious identity, or the diverse ways in which religion contributes to or is shaped by the processes of identification. The essays had their origin in the annual symposium sponsored by the Kripke Center at Creighton University, February 19-20, 2015.

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