During a recent interview, a middle-aged woman who was a faithful Catholic and a staunch supporter of the pro-life movement explained her opposition to abortion by quoting the Bible verse (Jer. 1:5) in which God says, “I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb.” The verse was proof, she said, that human personhood begins at the moment of conception and that, in any case, God knows everyone’s heart even before they are born.

Her comment put me in mind of other verses. Having been raised in a church that sang psalms rather than hymns, I was reminded of Psalm 139 in which the psalmist writes, “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely.”

I asked a student of mine if similar ideas were expressed in the Qur’an. She said there were and pointed me to the Al-Baqara Surah (2:77) in which the Prophet writes,
“Do they not know, then, that God is aware of all that they would conceal as well as of all that they bring into the open?”

It is an interesting thought, this idea of a watchful God who knows even better than the most sophisticated GPS tracking device where you are at any moment and, not only that, but can see inside your brain and read your mind. This is surely an idea that has given many a school child pause about uttering a curse word or telling a dirty joke.

Cognitive psychologists suggest that belief in a watchful, all-knowing deity can affect a person’s behavior in several important ways (Barrett 2002a, 2002b; Barrett and Lawson 2001; Barrett and Johnson 2003). It can, for example, focus believers’ attention on the significance of right thoughts, correct motives, good intentions, hidden reasons and deep-seated habits of the heart to a much greater extent than would be the case for people who did not believe in God or who thought the gods could observe only their behavior and not the inner workings of their mind. If that were the case, belief in a mind-penetrating deity could be a powerful source of moral guidance, but could also inflict strong feelings of guilt and shame. If the watchful deity was somehow more beneficent, a believer could be comforted by its constant presence and could even carry on quiet conversations with this invisible companion.

Apart from its possible psychological ramifications, the idea of a watchful deity who monitors thoughts and feelings poses questions about the social management of concealment and disclosure. In ordinary social relationships, for example, are there ways in which the ability to withhold information about thoughts, feelings and even behavior serve important functions? What happens when a person decides to disclose such information or when it is disclosed by someone else against the person’s will? How do
such disclosures — or the threat of them — function in religious congregations? What information do individuals normally regard as being too private to share with anyone they may interact with in a religious setting? How are the relationships in which disclosures are made — “confessions,” for example — managed? What difference does it make if someone voluntarily shares information that is normally considered too intimate to discuss in public? Or is forced to divulge such information? How does all that connect with questions about gossip, the therapeutic functions of religion, testimonials, sex scandals, and spiritual manipulations of the body.

In this paper I discuss the concept of intimate knowledge and suggest ways in which the social management of such knowledge poses interesting possibilities for new research in five broad areas: individual spirituality and religious congregations, and more briefly, social networks, morality, and public space. I discuss existing concepts and studies that point to the possible ways in which new research might be conducted. An attractive aspect of research about the role of intimate knowledge is that it intersects with broader questions about both micro and macro social processes. It also poses questions that can be addressed through qualitative research, surveys, or some combination of the two.

My emphasis on intimate knowledge is deliberate. While it goes without saying that connections between intimacy and religion might be studied (and indeed have been extensively and thus serve importantly as groundwork), I believe a case can also be made for paying specific attention to intimate knowledge. As I try to show, research about intimate knowledge can build on recent work in the social sciences on cognition and draws on insights about the ways in which people talk about what they know.
Intimate knowledge is socially defined, governed by rules about its concealment and disclosure, and dealt with as an empowering and dangerous topic that reveals spiritual insight, shapes the religious behavior of individuals and congregations, and connects with understandings of morality and politics. Intimate knowledge is part and parcel of religious rituals, prayer, and acts of confession and forgiveness. It figures importantly in the sacred manipulation of bodies, secrets, gossip, public scandals, and of course sex (Bok 1983).

**Intimate Knowledge**

Sociologist Viviana Zelizer argues in her book *Purchase of Intimacy* (2005) that intimacy primarily connotes closeness, as in two people being physically intimate with one another, and intimate knowledge is thus the kind exchanged in such relationships — particularized to that pair or small community of individuals. “The knowledge involved,” she writes, “includes such elements as shared secrets, interpersonal rituals, bodily information, awareness of personal vulnerability and shared memory of embarrassing situations” (Zelizer, 2005:14-15).

In addition, this knowledge may be expressed, she suggests, through special words of endearment, bodily services, private languages and emotional support. It usually implies trust between the parties involved. Examples of these expressions of intimacy appear in ordinary speech and behavior. “My darling” is easily recognized as a more intimate greeting than “Dear Sir.” “Mommy” suggests a more intimate relationship than “Mother.”
Intimate bodily services include such activities as a parent giving a child a bath or grooming the child’s hair. Private languages that signal intimacy include nicknames understood and used only by family and close friends and restricted speech that refers to an implied meaning or relationship, such as “you know who I’m talking about” or “you member that time we got into trouble.”

Emotional support demonstrates intimacy when the parties involved show emotion, such as anger or grief, in behavior, such as shouting or crying, that they would find embarrassing in other settings and when the other person offers words of understanding or condolence. As these examples suggest, intimacy is culturally constructed and thus defined by the specific situation, the parties in that situation, their prior interaction, and the customs they share. While there may be words and actions that generally connote intimacy within an entire population, intimate knowledge implies meanings known most fully and uniquely to the immediate parties involved.

Randall Collins (2004, 2010) has usefully extended the discussion of intimate knowledge by observing that intimate relationships are typically among the most emotionally charged, personally meaningful forms of social interaction in which people engage. Collins includes small gatherings of intimate associates, sexual relations, other forms of touching, and even the solitary rituals in which people routinely engage, such as prayer, meditation, daydreaming and fantasy, as examples. It is these small-scale, face-to-face interactions and the private musings we entertain about them, he argues, that are especially sought after and especially rewarding. The knowledge acquired in these moments and the memories of what was gained are frequently the stuff from which concepts of the sacred are made.
Because intimacy implies that a relationship is somehow special (close rather than distant), a great deal of cultural work both in specific situations and in wider contexts goes into defining what constitutes intimacy and how its meanings should be understood. The proximity and juxtaposition of human bodies necessitates such definitional activity to the extent that sexual relations nearly always connote intimacy while in other cases social norms determine whether or not intimacy is implied. For example, two people may experience physical bodily contact for an extended length of time but not regard the contact as an intimate relationship because the context is the crowded seating arrangement of an aircraft. Apart from actual physical contact, the situations in which bodies share social space are subject to varying connotations about intimacy. For example, “let’s get together for coffee” (Gaudio 2003) carries different implications than “let’s have dinner” or “why don’t you come over to my place?”

The cultural work that defines understandings of intimacy is prevalent enough but also sufficiently taken for granted that references to intimate knowledge are sometimes metaphoric, rather than pertaining specifically to intimate social relationships. For example, it is not uncommon to hear that a software programmer has an “intimate knowledge” of computers or that an automobile mechanic is “intimately acquainted” with the innards of an automatic transmission. In these examples intimacy refers to familiarity and the possession of expert knowledge. Because computers and automatic transmissions are sometimes likened to people or talked about as if they were human bodies, intimacy becomes a suitable metaphor.

The concept that overlaps frequently enough with intimacy to generate confusion is privacy. In political discourse a great deal is said about the distinctions between private
and public. Legal distinctions refer to the fact that a business entity may be privately or publicly owned or that a person has a right to privacy. Broader cultural distinctions suggest that the population may be retreating from public life into private activities, such as sitting at home watching television, or that people increasingly do or do not regard their religious faith as a private affair that should not be discussed in public. These distinctions intersect with understandings of intimacy, but also demonstrate the importance of separating the two.

Knowledge that a person chooses to be private about is not always intimate knowledge. For example, my neighbor may know the names of every major league baseball pitcher, but the fact that he does not talk about this information does not make it intimate knowledge. Conversely, knowledge that becomes public can still be intimate knowledge, as in the case of a public official’s extramarital affair being reported on the evening news. It is because intimate knowledge is special to a particular person or social relationship that efforts are often made to keep that information private.

With this understanding of intimacy as background, we can posit as a general proposition that the disclosure of intimate knowledge establishes and expresses a potentially powerful social relationship. Power inheres in the fact that something not widely known is being revealed. The disclosure is potentially powerful because it communicates something embarrassing, something purposively hidden because of legal or cultural norms, or a piece of information that betrays a confidence. Its disclosure may be emotionally powerful as well, sufficiently so to evoke tenderness, submission, anger, or tears.
Power of these kinds is implied in the notion that the social relationship at issue is close. It is close perhaps in physical proximity, in emotional attachment, and in the scope of a person’s self-identity. Examples of the power implicit in disclosures of intimate knowledge range from the emotional blackmail a school child can exercise by threatening to reveal a secret about a classmate or the political fallout that occurs when a candidate is discovered having an extramarital affair.

In the former case, it is the threat of disclosure even more than an actual revelation in which power resides, while in the latter case the extramarital affair may include a special sense of empowerment for the parties involved as long as the affair remains their secret. It is the closeness of the relationship that makes knowledge intimate in the first place and confers power on potential disclosures of that knowledge.

However, it is not the case that disclosures of intimate knowledge always imply closeness. Consider the fact that people routinely reveal the most intimate parts of their bodies to their doctors and tell financial advisors or lawyers details about their business activities that they would not want any of their closest friends to know. Doctor-patient and lawyer-client relationships involve the disclosure of intimate knowledge, and they imply power and the potential use of power, but are not close in the way that relationships among spouses, lovers, and bosom buddies are close.

I mention these examples because they illustrate a second main proposition about intimate knowledge; because it is potentially powerful, disclosures of intimate knowledge are carefully managed. They are managed through implicit social norms, such as the ones governing the sharing of casual information among neighbors in small towns, and
through highly formal structures and legal conventions, such as the professional practices adhered to by doctors and lawyers.

Furthermore, the ability to manage the disclosure of intimate knowledge is itself a reflection of power arrangements or a means through which power is conferred. The fact that a neighbor has intimate knowledge to disclose and chooses to do so, for example, says something about that neighbor’s place in the community. So does the fact that the doctor or lawyer decides what questions to ask, but is in turn governed by professional and legal norms in using the answers to those questions.

Consider what a secretary in her late fifties who has lived all her life in a town of 12,000 people says about her community. She likes the fact that you “go down the street and know the people around you.” The woman across the street cuts her husband’s hair and gives him a special shampoo. Her husband fixes the tire on the woman's lawn mower. The kids next door rent from them and help out with small home maintenance jobs. Her husband is a mail carrier. He knows a lot about the people on his route because of the mail they receive. She used to run the local donut shop. She heard what people talked about over coffee. Clearly she has access to a lot of intimate knowledge about her neighbors and they have intimate knowledge about her. “It’s just knowing people in relationships that I value,” she says.

But this is also what she does not like about her community. “Everybody knows everybody’s business,” she says. “That gets kind of old. Rumors fly big time.” A few years ago she was diagnosed with cancer. She recalls, “Shoot, I was dead twice during the time I had cancer.” It annoyed her how quickly personal information spread. “If you
have to go take a test at the hospital, the whole town knows it. Privacy act or none, it doesn’t matter.”

What this example illustrates is the importance of being able to manage intimate knowledge. It is one thing to have people know what kind of shampoo you prefer if you control the disclosure of that information. It is very different if word spreads about the latest test you’ve had at the hospital. Residents of small communities effectively manage the sharing of some intimate knowledge, but consistently note the powerlessness they feel when their management efforts fail. In those instances, they feel at the mercy of the community.

The management of intimate knowledge can be divided into several major zones of contestation: Who has access to intimate knowledge? Who makes the decision to disclose it? To whom is it disclosed? What counts as intimate knowledge in the first place? Why is it special and worth protecting? How is it disclosed? How are disclosures interpreted? For example, are they treated as a breach of etiquette, a term of endearment, an expression of anger, revenge, a crime, an insight, a revelation, or something else?

With these preliminary considerations in place, I can now bring religion back into the picture. A great deal of what religion is about, I would argue, is intimate knowledge. On the surface, it is easy to see that religion often seeks to govern such intimate details of life as sexual intercourse, the timing of conception, veiling of the head or face, other expressions of bodily modesty and submission, the manner in which love is ceremonialized, and the ways in which sins are condemned. A person’s private feelings of guilt are in some traditions items that are supposed to be confessed to a priest. The deepest definition of a person’s self-identity is sometimes thought to be found in an
experience of transcendence, which may be considered too intimate or too special to share with anyone else except under the most closely defined circumstances. As I mentioned, religious practitioners who feel close to God may also believe that God knows their most intimate thoughts.

Another insight from cognitive psychology research is important as well. Human attempts to understand something as different from their own experience as a divine being typically anthropomorphize that being. In theory, we might agree that God knows our inner thoughts all the time, but in practice we figure that God is enough like us to pay attention some of the time and be distracted at other times. We pray and worship to get God’s attention at special times. We tell ourselves that some people are better at communicating with God than others.

In other ways, religion is further associated with intimate knowledge. Insofar as it deals with feelings and experiences, as research often suggests, it operates in the realm of intimate knowledge. Religion also bears the marks of privileged knowledge that only a few can fully know, such as those who believe properly, study the scriptures faithfully, or participate in ritual activities. Knowledge of God is intimate knowledge, attained only through special practices or revealed only to the chosen few, the prophets, saints, martyrs, and mystics.

Of central interest, then, are questions about how religious individuals and organizations manage intimate knowledge. Are there human relationships, for example, that provide models for how intimate knowledge is to be shared with God and with fellow humans? Are there reasons, for instance, that parents are often cast in roles similar to the ones God is assumed to play and vice versa? Do congregations and communities
express different norms about intimate knowledge? What further might we learn from people who describe how intimate knowledge is shared in their social networks, how it affects their moral decisions, and the role it plays in public life?

**Spirituality**

I use the term “spirituality” here to refer broadly to an individual person’s perceived relationship with God or some other deity or transcendent reality or being. While it is certainly the case, as some research suggests, that spirituality can be distinguished from organized religion, qualitative interviews and survey evidence indicates that people usually think of it in the terms I use here (Wuthnow 1998).

This perceived relationship with transcendence or the supernatural does imply some connection with a person’s self concept, and it may be practiced alone or not involve active effort at all, but frequently relates people to organized religion or to the arts, music, literature, science, and of course to networks of friends and acquaintances.

Taking the cognitive psychology work I mentioned previously as a starting point, research might usefully focus on the extent to which people believe that an omniscient deity has access to intimate knowledge about their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Whereas previous research about belief in God has emphasized degrees of certainty or doubt and has considered canonical words (such as “righteous” and “powerful”), inquiries about God’s knowledge of intimate matters would necessarily pay greater attention to how believers perceive of God actually being involved in their affairs. Barrett’s research suggests that it may be useful to ask respondents about imaginary deities that vary in mind-reading capabilities rather than focusing on creedal descriptions.
of God. In controlled experimental contexts, Barrett and his colleagues were able to manipulate various aspects of imaginary deities to determine how these variations related to subjects’ thoughts about how rituals should be performed.

While it is undoubtedly an exaggeration to argue, as Rodney Stark (2003367) has, that “Gods were long ago banished from the social scientific study of religion,” there is certainly room for concerted, innovative research about popular understandings of who God is and what God knows. In addition to further research of the kind Barrett has done in experimental settings, studies might usefully incorporate questions into surveys and conduct qualitative interviews in which respondents described their understandings of what God knows. It would be particularly interesting to learn from these various techniques whether respondents think God monitors their good thoughts and feelings as closely as negative, illicit, or immoral thoughts and feelings. The tendency noted in cognitive psychology studies for respondents to anthropomorphize deities also merits further investigation. For example, are there times, say, during natural disasters, wars, or rush hour traffic when God is too busy to pay much attention to a random illicit thought?

These questions about what God knows necessarily shift the focus of inquiry in the direction of God as thinker or watcher, as opposed to God as judge, king, ruler, and many other traditional images. It is not surprising that cognitive psychologists have taken this approach, but it also seems a useful direction because of broader attention to cognitive science and growing interest in studies of neuropsychology and the mind.

In the same way that patriarchal images of God reflected the societies in which they originated, imagery in contemporary contexts is likely to be influenced by these emphases on cognition. It is not unheard of for God to be described as a super computer,
a being that is infinitely smarter than the smartest humans, a source of wisdom and insight, a master scientist, or a powerful information processor.

In a study that provides rare insight into what Americans actually think about God, sociologists Paul Froese and Christopher Bader (2010) conclude that 24 percent of adults in the United States can best be classified as believing in a distant God who requires little of believers and generally does not respond very directly or specifically to a person’s wants and needs. Another 16 percent believe in a critical God who is basically judgmental but not very close or involved in personal affairs (5 percent do not believe in God).

That leaves 55 percent who believe in a deity with whom they can or do have a more intimate relationship. These people divide between the ones (31 percent) who mostly believe in an authoritative God who judges them and the others (24 percent) whose deity is a benevolent God who loves them, answers prayers, and even performs miracles. Presumably an authoritative or benevolent God is close enough to know about a person’s private life.

For people who in theory at least believe that God knows all of their most intimate thoughts and feelings, a further question of interest is which of these thoughts and feelings God cares about and, beyond that, how God finds out about these various pieces of information and whether that matters. A start toward answering these questions is suggested in conceptual and empirical research on God as “lover,” “friend,” and “mother” (McFague 1982, Roof and Roof 1984, Greeley 1990, MacDonald 1992).

Presumably a loving, friendly, motherly deity would have greater access to and interest in the intimate details of a person’s life than a remote unfriendly one. But there is
still much to be learned about how a friendly God actually pays attention to certain thoughts and actions. The reason to be interested in these topics is that they may illuminate how conceptions of God encourage or impede feelings of guilt and shame. After the fact rationalizations that appear in religious discourse, such as sermons, would be of interest as well.

For instance, consider the statement about carnal thoughts that a person “cannot prevent birds from flying overhead, but can keep them from building a nest in one’s hair.” The implication here is that God knows about both and is displeased with both, but excuses the former on grounds that a person has variously spent less time entertaining a carnal thought, had carnal thoughts less frequently, developed them less fully into an elaborate set of ideas, or exercised willful intentionality to a greater extent.

In short, there are ways of sidetracking God’s wrath even if there are not ways to keep God from knowing one’s thoughts. It also may matter, as this example suggests, whether the deity learns about a carnal thought only because of mind-reading capabilities that cause certain pieces of information to show up on a divine monitor or because of also being able to scan the relationships between that thought and the full corpus of a person’s mental activity, or is more attentive if the thought includes pictures or results in an audible conversation.

These questions may be as obscure theologically as the proverbial conundrum of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but once God is regarded as a thought-monitor, these distinctions become a part of the implicit bargains believers make in relating to God.
Besides the popular theology involved in such considerations, an anthropology of the human person who relates to God is also implied. The much debated question among cultural sociologists about how best to understand culture is a case in point (Swidler 1986, 2008; Vaisey 2008, 2009). The question is whether some aspects of a person’s thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values may be “too deep” to be easily identified or articulated. One view holds that there are such deep, vague, hidden, undisclosed, inner convictions that are sufficiently powerful to guide behavior even when people do not consciously realize it.

The alternative view suggests that whatever may exist that deeply in the self is either unimportant or sufficiently fungible that bits and pieces can be used to get whatever a person wants and to justify those activities after the fact. Translated, what we have here is a debate about intimate knowledge. One side implies that some knowledge may be so intimate that it is hardly known even to the person who has it and certainly is not the kind of thing a person goes around talking about. Terms such as “deep” and “inner” associate such knowledge with the body or the spirit, while words such as “long-lasting” and “enduring” suggest that they are built up over time in the same way that intimate relationships between children and parents or between spouses and close friends are.

Sometimes words of endearment are used as well, such as “heart,” “heartfelt,” and “passionate.” The other side says nothing is quite that intimate, indeed, given the right circumstances, people will talk about anything. It is thus appropriate to use less intimate words, such as “tool kit,” “repertoire,” and “script.” Of course this is not all that the
debate is about, but part of it hinges on different views of what is “deep” or not deep and what kinds of self-reflexivity are possible.

The debate’s specific relevance to religion is that two cross-cutting views about the kinds of intimate spiritual knowledge that are appropriate to disclose can be identified. In popular parlance one view holds that religious convictions should be “worn on one’s sleeve,” so to speak, and for that matter shared as often and as openly as possible, while the other view prefers silence.

Interestingly, both views can be defended on grounds that religious convictions are “deep.” But deep to one means “important enough to talk about,” while to the other it means “too important to talk about.” Both views can also be interpreted through the “less deep” lens. Less deep to one implies the need to talk until convictions do become deep, while to the other less deep suggests that talk is too cheap to express anything very important.

The reason for connecting these differences to questions about intimate knowledge is that intimacy is implied, although interpreted in varying ways. It is implied in the same way that sexual relations do in being understood as deeply personal, private, and appropriate to discuss only in special circumstances. It is not uncommon for sexual relations and spirituality to be described as matters of the soul or as affairs of the heart. Both imply, as Zelizer suggests, personal vulnerability, secretive or dangerous information, and sharing only among trusted others and in carefully specified circumstances. In many instances, the spiritually inclined feel a special closeness to God, just as they do with a soul mate, and feel that God is like a person with whom they can
share their innermost concerns. That God knows all their thoughts and feelings is truly of comfort.

If spirituality implies that God knows the intimate details of a person’s life, it poses the related question of how much intimate knowledge a person can acquire about God. This question involves the metaphors that are used in religious discourse to describe God. Saying that God is “close” or that a person feels “close” to God, for example, implies greater intimacy and better possibilities for acquiring intimate knowledge about God than if the deity is distant.

Insofar as anthropomorphic images of God are present, a “close” deity can also mean that the deity is more attentive to one’s thoughts and feelings, less easily distracted by circumstances somewhere else in the universe, and better able to help. For instance, a “close” deity whose presence is immanent can more easily wipe away a person’s tears or find that person a parking space. In other ways, imagery implies a close relationship with God without actually saying that God is nearby as a physical person. In interviews people talk about “seeing the face of Jesus,” for example, feeling that God lives inside them, that Jesus is in their heart, or that God has sent an angel to be with them or a message from the Blessed Virgin.

Like intimate human relationships, though, intimate knowledge of God may be acquired more easily under certain circumstances than others. If sexual intimacy best occurs in the privacy of a bedroom, spiritual intimacy with God might require a special chair, a prayer rug or shawl, attendance at a house of worship, participation in a fellowship group, or sitting in a special posture in front of a home altar. Special ritual acts are likely to be needed in these special places as well.
To be intimate with God may require folding one’s hands, closing one’s eyes, bowing one’s head, prostrating oneself, saying certain liturgical prayers, reading a sacred text, singing certain lyrics, chanting, or listening to the spoken words of a designated person with appropriate training. The intimate knowledge gained from these acts is somehow better, clearer, more relevant, or more authoritative than the knowledge about God that might be acquired second hand or from taking a class at a university.

The special locations and acts through which intimate knowledge of God is attained show that an emphasis on intimate knowledge need not be limited to inquiries into mental processes or beliefs. As critics of the standard beliefs and values approach to the study of religion have suggested (Asad 1993, Orsi 2005, McGuire 2008), religion includes much more than the mentalities and world views that this approach has typically emphasized. The trouble with some attempts to shift toward “practice” or “lived religion,” though, is that only the unconscious “habitus” remains or else only the observable activities themselves are all that remain. Attention clearly needs to include consideration of the purpose of these activities for their practitioners. One purpose, I suggest, is acquiring intimate knowledge about God.

What might that intimate knowledge be? In interviews, people describe special feelings that God is with them, truly loves them, cares about them, and blesses them. They sometimes describe divine radiance, a sweet aroma, or a glimpse into heaven. Occasionally they realize that God has a sense of humor or has been keeping secrets. More commonly they realize that God has a special plan for their life or is guiding them to make a certain decision. They may also feel that God has forgiven them or told them about something that will happen in the future. Although metaphoric language is typical,
it is not uncommon for people to include descriptions of physical intimacy, such as touching the face of God or dwelling in God’s hand.

Research on conversion and other spiritual transformations suggests that intimate knowledge often plays a role either in producing these changes or as a result of them. In conversion narratives, the initial pre-conversion state is often described as one of separation or distance from God, living in darkness, harboring secrets about misdeeds, confusion, or a lack of knowledge. Through the conversion process, the person moves from darkness into light, from confusion to knowledge, from a lack of clarity to insight or wisdom, and from separation to intimacy with God. What was formerly an austere deity now becomes a loving companion. God as father becomes God as daddy, mother, or friend. The head knowledge that a person formerly had about God is now a secret of the heart. The false self is replaced by a true self (Stromberg 1993).

While research usually suggests that these transformations are matters of belief and perception, studies increasingly pay attention to the physical manifestations through which spirituality is embodied. Intimate spiritual knowledge is attained through physically intimate acts, both literal and metaphoric. A person is healed through the laying on of hands and an anointing of oil. Consecration occurs through the ritual mikvah or through immersion in water or through circumcision. Cleansing of the spirit happens from fasting, through foot washing, or from sexual abstinence.

I suggest these examples as topics for further research because many of them have already been fruitfully studied and yet have raised additional questions. The concept of intimate knowledge focuses attention on what exactly the knowledge is that is gained about God or about the self. Instead of merely describing religious experience as a
feeling, a researcher may be encouraged to pay attention to what is learned during the experience and whether that knowledge is described in ways that imply intimacy. Does it suggest closeness, is it particular to the person involved, is it special because of how it was attained, and is it the kind of information that can be disclosed or should be kept private?

Zelizer’s work has been particularly insightful in addressing questions about the transgression of taken for granted social and cultural boundaries in transactions involving intimacy, such as the selling of sex or the pricing of children (Zelizer 2010). Similar questions can be posed about intimate spiritual transgressions.

For example, an implicit financial bargain is typically present when a person receives spiritual knowledge from a provider, such as a guru or priest, and then voluntarily contributes alms in support of this provider, but is the purity of that knowledge corrupted if the transaction is more explicitly financial? Can “enlightenment” be purchased or does it then become too much like other commodities?

Broader questions also remain to be investigated. While descriptions of intimate spiritual knowledge are interesting, variation and the sources of these variations are also important. For example, it would be interesting to know if differences in intimacies within families are associated with different perceptions of intimate spiritual knowledge.

A parent who tells a child that God is always watching, for instance, might be taken more seriously by the child if the parent also kept close tabs on the child’s play time, television viewing, and homework assignments. Gender differences in expressions of intimacy may also be especially important. While many arguments have been advanced to explain why women are generally more interested in spirituality and religion
then men, one possibility worth further consideration may be that women are more often attuned to discussions of intimacies in other realms.

**Congregational Life**

Questions about intimate knowledge in the spiritual lives of individuals necessarily bridge into topics about congregational life. Insofar as the conditions under which practitioners gain intimate knowledge about God are monitored, it is likely to be a congregation that does so. Participants learn that true insights into the personality of God and effective communication of their needs to God occur more effectively when attending weekly services than when sitting at home, when heeding the advice of clergy, and when interacting with like-minded believers. Besides interviewing members to investigate these methods of control, it would be useful to study the extent to which discourse about intimacy is used in sermons, discussions, and other meetings.

Examples of language through which intimacy is conveyed include the use of first names for clergy (“Pastor Susan,” “Brother Mark”) and calling on members or praying for them during services (“Lord, remember Sara in her time of need”). Homilies may encourage listeners to imagine an intimate relationship with God (“Jesus enters into our hearts”) or employ metaphors of intimacy (“We stand naked before God”). Family metaphors provide opportunities for such language, as Penny Edgell (2005) observes in her research among congregations in upstate New York. Likening the congregation to a family suggests that intimate relationships could pertain, even if they truly do not. Being “God’s children” and “sitting at the feet of Jesus” suggests that spirituality is intimate.
While clergy may be careful to avoid disclosing intimate knowledge about members that should remain private, they may imply having such knowledge. One method of pulling the curtain back on their own backstage behavior is to tell about a conversation that took place at their dinner table or an incident from their childhood. Intimate knowledge is not revealed that would embarrass anyone in the story, but setting it in their home suggests to the congregation that intimate settings matter.

The same is evident in sermons that dwell on scriptural stories about sex, adultery, tears, and relationships between husbands and wives. More interesting perhaps are clergy narratives in which private information is shown to exist, and can easily be imagined, but is not explicitly disclosed. “I was standing beside the hospital bed of a man who was dying of lung cancer just a few days ago,” a pastor might say. Without actually violating health privacy laws, the pastor conveys to regular members of the congregation who did not already know it that the man they knew was ill has now taken a turn for the worse and, for that matter, all those years of smoking may result in his death.

The knowledge that bestows authority on doctors, lawyers, and scientists consists of specialized information that forms what is popularly regarded as expertise. Knowledge of this kind is obviously present in the case of religious professionals as well, at least in the formal of language skills and the ability to read and interpret sacred texts. Although the specialized knowledge that gives authority to professionals is generally codified and open to anyone with the talent and time to learn it, intimate knowledge is relevant in at least a couple of ways. The first is knowledge of matters that most non-specialists would consider intimate and indeed would seldom talk about with anyone except their most intimate significant others.
For example, it was widely assumed until sometime in the twentieth century when sexual behavior came to be discussed more openly that nurses were a bit like prostitutes in being either better or worse as sexual partners because of having knowledge about the human body — and indeed many of them — that ordinary people lacked. Or as another example, a person is likely to experience some embarrassment at meeting one’s urologist at a party, even though no violations of doctor-patient confidentiality have occurred.

The second way in which intimate knowledge may be present in the case of religious functionaries is if that person claims to have — or is believed to have — special powers of discernment, either as a particular talent or because of a divine gift. An example would be a clairvoyant who seems capable of looking into one’s soul or a spiritual guide who claims to sense another person’s emotional needs with special acuity. The literature on religious authority provides ample material for considering the ways in which intimate knowledge influences the relationships between leaders and followers and in other contexts of asymmetric power.

Confession is a matter of particular importance in congregations. Although an item for confession might not involve a disclosure of intimate knowledge (for example, a person might confess to having wanted to pursue a different career or a congregation might euphemistically confess to “all the sins we have done”), revelations about sex, illicit thoughts, or behavior that has been kept secret (such as lying or stealing) are common enough that congregations generally have rules about how, when, and to whom confession should be made.

If confession is made privately to a member of the clergy, the confession becomes a secret between the parties involved and thus entails certain assumptions about the
relative power of their roles. Like an all knowing God, the clergy person becomes an actual monitor who can watch for signs that the confessed behavior continues and an internalized mental voice that says, in effect, “I’m watching!”

Public confession poses special concerns about who has the right to disclose information. Voluntary disclosures (such as a parishioner asking for prayer in dealing with an abusive spouse) suggest that those in the congregation who hear the disclosure may be obligated to provide help. Disclosures of intimate information in one setting, such as a small fellowship group, can become the basis for gossip that in some circumstances becomes destructive and in others functions like “casting bread on the waters” such that someone learns indirectly about the need and becomes an anonymous provider of care (De Sousa 2004). Such instances are sometimes the basis for “miracle stories” in which “God” seems to have mysteriously heard about a need and moved someone’s heart to provide a blessing, when in fact the information was conveyed as gossip.

An example that illustrates the varying ramifications of how intimate knowledge is managed in congregations comes from research I have been conducting in communities with large increases in immigrant population as a result of employment opportunities in meat processing plants and related agribusiness entities. The quantitative literature on religion and immigration has usefully provided insights about general patterns of adaptation to new communities and ethnographic studies have shown how congregations help immigrants feel at home and support one another. However, much remains to be learned about variations in the handling of delicate information in these settings.

The most sensitive kind of intimate knowledge in these communities concerns the legal status of immigrant workers. Although employers have been subject to fines and
other penalties for hiring undocumented workers, exceptions have not been uncommon and in other instances employees and relatives have been the focus of raids by immigration officials who sometimes arrested and deported unsuspecting immigrants for minor technical violations. Congregations have found themselves in the difficult position of handling information that might protect undocumented workers in some situations or put them in jeopardy in others.

Apart from the special circumstances that arise when legality is at issue (as in the case of undocumented workers), intimate knowledge is generally an important aspect of any care giving relationship in which the physical or emotional need involved is personal, potentially embarrassing, or subject to manipulation for the purpose of extracting payment. It is for this reason that disclosures of such information to doctors, lawyers, and therapists are guarded by legal statutes and professional norms.

Informal care giving of the kind that takes place within families, among friends, and in voluntary organizations is less structured and for this reason sociologically more interesting and certainly more relevant for consideration in relation to the study of religious communities. Religious teachings encourage generosity of time and money to help the needy, often by suggesting that such behavior should be done in obedience to God and should be performed freely and altruistically, and yet with the expectation of receiving personal benefits ranging from emotional gratification to rewards in heaven. These teachings are often quite explicit in terms of who should be helped and what examples of meritorious service should be emulated. Yet the manner in which intimate knowledge about the recipients of care giving is to be handled is seldom specified.

*Networks, Morality, and Public Space*
I will mention briefly some of the ways in which intimate knowledge may be of interest in studies of religion and social networks, religion and morality, and religion in public life. These are topics of interest that do not pertain directly to individual spirituality or happen within congregations and yet have an indirect relationship with religious practices. Social networks outside of congregations may serve as vehicles for sharing information about religion, morality may involve rules about concealment and disclosure that are influenced by religious convictions, and public space may be the location for discussions about scandals involving religious or political leaders, among other things.

In the examples I gave earlier of people in small towns complaining about the ease with which gossip spreads it was the disclosure of intimate knowledge that people found especially troublesome. Intimate knowledge that they would have preferred to conceal included illnesses and stays in the hospital that would have been fine for friends and neighbors to know about as long as the information was disclosed accurately, but was problematic when misinformation was reported. It also included information about business transactions. This information usually appeared at some point in the local newspaper in a column about land sales or deed transfers, but otherwise was closely guarded because of the general taboo against talking about money and specific local concerns about a business deal going sour because of back channel information being disclosed. In small communities gossip spreads easily among fellow members of a congregation and crosses readily from the wider community into congregations.

Another point from small communities is that disclosures of intimate knowledge are an important way in which a sense of “community” — feeling “in it together,
“knowing everyone,” being “in the community” — is established. When a neighbor says “I hear your aunt had a fall,” the information shared indicates that the neighbor is part of a dense social network that includes both you and your aunt and possibly someone else who knows your aunt. The information is quite different from saying, “I was just down at the café and they were saying it might rain.” It is the disclosure of otherwise private information that says in effect, “I have ways of finding out what you are doing because I know people who know you well. I know them well enough to have some intimate knowledge about them.”

This is the kind of information noted in studies of gossip as a mechanism of social control (Heilman 1998). A neighbor who knows your aunt that well could also find out, you can imagine, if you got drunk or had an affair. It is the perennial dilemma of teenagers in communities small enough that the neighbor who sees them engaged in wrongdoing reports to the priest who then pays a visit to the parents (Orsi 1985, Bailey 1999).

But it is the absence of these back channels that makes religious congregations in most contexts function as something less than a true community, even though their leaders may talk as if the congregation were a community. When members see one another only during worship services and do not know each other’s friends well enough to have access to intimate knowledge, the congregation’s ability to control members’ behavior — or, for that matter, to provide care and support — is weakened.

A question that has received little attention in studies of gossip concerns the norms about what can and cannot legitimately be disclosed (Finch and Bowen 1990). A common misunderstanding is that anything can be revealed, no matter how awkward or
embarrassing it may be. But that is clearly not the case. A gossip gets a bad name if the information spread is too often inaccurate, blatantly false, or malicious (Jaeger et al. 2004). It may be appropriate to reveal that someone’s aunt is in the hospital, but not that a neighbor is an alcoholic or runs past the window naked.

What is appropriate to disclose is especially interesting in religiously diverse and transcultural settings. For example, people of different faiths may find it appropriate to discuss the traditions in which they were raised, but not the content of their current beliefs. In cross-cultural encounters, hospitality and the sharing of gifts imply norms about intimacy that are easily be misunderstood.

Short-term mission volunteers, for instance, describe unease about revealing details about their personal lives, sharing meals, and using first names or other terms of endearment (Probasco 2010). Exchanges of intimate knowledge across gender lines in these contexts may be especially problematic. In religiously pluralistic situations, negotiating definitions of intimate knowledge is particularly important for teachers, nurses, police, and other service workers.

Just as cross-cultural interaction does, historical comparisons offer additional possibilities for examining the relationships among intimate knowledge, spirituality, and community. For example, historian David G. Hackett (2011) examines the development of freemasonry in the United States from the eighteenth century into the early twentieth century, showing the extent to which it functioned for men in much the same ways that religious congregations did for women. One of Hackett’s central theses is that freemasonry was an important site for the exchange of intimate knowledge. Members not only shared secret knowledge about the lodges’ rituals, but also became intimately
acquainted with the personal lives of fellow members. Hackett argues that freemasonry was appealing for many members because it offered a setting for more intimate relationships than was true in the increasingly competitive commercialized world of industrial and urban America.

Indeed, by the early nineteenth century Masonic ceremonies paid greater attention to cultivating an interior self and supplying secret wisdom to achieve this goal. The contrast with the outside world, which Masonic rituals portrayed as cold and uninviting, was evident even in the elaborate textured costumes and sensory homey atmosphere that characterized meetings. Freemasonry was undoubtedly one of the examples that Alexis de Tocqueville (1969:604) had in mind in the 1830s when he wrote of each American citizen breaking into “small and very distinct groups to taste the pleasures of private life.”

To an even greater extent than many religious congregations, freemasonry also controlled the kinds of intimate knowledge that could be disclosed and specified to whom it could be shared. In mutual assistance given to members’ families at times of illness and bereavement, for example, members learned of one another’s needs and keep some of these needs from being known by outsiders.

In a broader context, questions of what can legitimately be disclosed lead to additional questions about morality. Moral issues typically are subject to strong norms about concealment and disclosure. An immoral act is often defined as intimate behavior conducted in the wrong place or with the wrong person. Public nudity and adultery are examples. It is the improper disclosure of information involving the body that violates norms of common decency and public morality. Invasions of the body, as in cases of rape and torture, constitute more extreme violations. Descriptions of other behavior that is
deemed improper, immoral, dangerous, or threatening frequently include metaphors of bodily invasion. For example, a terrorist attack strikes at the heart of the public and a political scandal is like a cancer that weakens the body politic.

A topic worth further investigation is the related question of how closely associated moral reason and intimate knowledge are understood to be. At one extreme, the notion of common sense moral reason that became increasingly widespread in the United States in the early nineteenth century held that everyone more or less was capable of making good moral judgments by virtue of merely being human and endowed the innate moral capacity by God (Noll 2002). An alternative view held that good moral judgment was a capacity that needed to be cultivated through formal education (Gutmann 1987). But there was also a view that associated the cultivation of moral judgment with more intimate settings.

One variant that has remained strong suggests that moral judgment must be nurtured in the family, not only because children are at a formative stage, but also because morality must be modeled by trusted loving parents and learned by practicing virtue in close social relationships. Another variant suggests that moral judgment is sufficiently intuitive that it is best acquired in settings that encourage special emotional experiences, gender relations, and narratives (Hunter 2000). Communes, nursery schools and day care centers using special methods, meditation centers, therapy and self-help groups, new religious movements, and religious congregations are among the settings that are often assumed to provide this kind of moral understanding.

An interesting line of empirical investigation would be to examine where parents believe moral judgment is best learned and whether they think some settings and certain
kinds of knowledge are more conducive to good moral understandings. Although it is likely that most respondents in a general population survey would answer that families are the best places in which to learn morality, a more in-depth investigation would need to ask if some families are better at conveying moral understandings and, if so, why.

Is it because parents spend more time cultivating a loving relationship with their children and serving as trusted role models? Is it necessary to expose children to Bible stories and encourage them to seek divine guidance? And for adults, what are the best ways to instill a stronger moral compass? Are principles of moral philosophical argumentation important? Or participation in support groups where intimate relationships develop?

Definitions of what constitutes intimate knowledge and what is or is not appropriate to do with it are subject to constant renegotiation, and in consequence are matters of moral contestation. Debates about reproductive technologies are a case in point. When bodies are defined as intimate spaces relevant only to a person and a significant other, decisions about in vitro fertilization, sperm donation, and egg implantation are deemed private and subject only to the moral considerations that might be concealed behind the legal wall protecting doctor-patient and clergy-member relationships, but when this information is regarded as a matter of public morality that may lead to a general disrespect for life or damage to the human race, the discussion necessarily changes (Evans 2010).

The ability to define intimacy and to disclose information about it necessarily raises questions about the authority of religious leaders. At one extreme, the authority to extract confessions, burn witches, and torture bodies suggests an era in which clergy held
power over the most intimate details of personal life. In contrast, contemporary examples suggest that clergy authority is one of many contenders that include artists and art critics, the entertainment industry, manufacturers of beauty and personal hygiene products, scientists, and government regulators. While many clergy condemned the affair between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky as adultery, for example, tabloid journalists and television news programs largely characterized the event as entertainment (Owen 2000).

Moral questions become especially intertwined with religion when religious arguments are used to justify special exemptions from, or insights into, matters of intimacy. An interesting example is Ida C. Craddock, the late nineteenth century Quaker mystic, author, occult leader, and sexologist whose story has recently been chronicled by historian Leigh Schmidt (2010). Craddock claimed special knowledge of sexual relations by virtue of having had sex with an angel named Soph. As the angel’s heavenly bride, she wrote steamy sex manuals that were banned under the censorship laws enacted through the efforts of moral crusader Anthony Comstock. Rather than face prison, Craddock took her own life, leaving behind a lengthy suicide note.

Such episodes demonstrate that controversies driven by questionable expressions of intimacy reflect and give rise to discussions about institutional strengths and weaknesses as well. Nicola Beisel’s (1990, 1993, 1997) examination of Comstock’s anti-vice crusades in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, for example, suggests that class-based social norms governing the disclosure of intimate knowledge are important ways in which parents maintain the social status of their offspring.

Upper class families in late nineteenth century East Coast cities considered it important to protect the “innocence” of their daughters and sons by preventing them from
reading literature that might induce sexual temptation and by keeping them from being corrupted by pornography or seduced by prostitutes and gamblers. Objectionable disclosures of intimacy ranged from viewing nudes at art museums to skating at public rinks (because of spills resulting in upended skirts). Upper class families were more closely knit in New York and Boston and felt greater need to protect their families from lower class immigrants than in Philadelphia. Beisel suggests that these differences became a principal reason for Comstock’s efforts succeeding to a greater extent in New York and Boston than in Philadelphia.

Episodes of moral transgression provide ample opportunity for interpreters to draw broader implications about what is wrong with social institutions and what should be done to reform them. Interesting examples are given in Joshua Gamson’s (2001) examination of media responses to three highly publicized sex scandals: televangelist Jimmy Swaggart’s 1988 encounter with prostitute Debra Murphree, actor Hugh Grant’s 1995 encounter with prostitute Divine Brown, and presidential advisor Dick Morris’ 1996 encounter with prostitute Sherry Rowlands. Although news coverage emphasized differences in the specific details of each encounter, journalists also developed what Gamson calls “institutional morality tales” that went beyond accusations of individual misbehavior.

The Swaggart episode became a cautionary tale about the hypocrisy of combining high financial stakes with evangelical theology; the Grant story, about the superficiality of Hollywood “spin” of celebrity images; and the Morris encounter, about the untrustworthiness of political consultants. Notwithstanding the different lessons that were drawn about different institutions, the rhetoric involved was much the same. Legitimate
sexual intimacy was implied to be deep, real, and long lasting by virtue of the encounters with prostitutes being described as shallow, hypocritical or inauthentic, and brief. When extended to the relevant institutions, these contrasts suggested that institutional decay is evident in the social relationships that make up these institutions being superficial, untrustworthy, and ephemeral.

Whether revelations of sexual misconduct that do not involve brief encounters with prostitutes result in similar or different allegations of institutional malaise is an interesting question that begs for additional research. For example, presidential candidate John Edwards’ 2008 affair with Rielle Hunter that resulted in the birth of a “love child” posed opportunities for commentary about the improprieties of long term adulterous relationships, as did South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford’s 2009 extramarital affair with an Argentinean woman known only as Maria (Griffith 2009). Gay sex scandals involving public officials such as Congressman Mark Foley and Senator Larry Craig and religious leaders Ted Haggard and George Rekers posed questions about hypocrisy, but also generated discussion about biological bases of sexual orientations and public acceptance of gay lifestyles.

Besides the fact that religious leaders are sometimes involved, these episodes become spiritual projects for the wider culture through the language in which they are typically interpreted. The misconduct itself is variously described by wrongdoers and accusers as sin, either literally or figuratively, and as a symptom of basic human fallibility. It typically occurs in darkness and involves shadowy and secretive behavior must be exposed to the bright light of day.
Following public disclosure, confession is called for as a vehicle for personal cleansing, although a confession that appears too soon or with questionable emotional valence is sometimes interpreted as a cynical attempt by the wrong doer to “save himself.” Questions about forgiveness, either by the aggrieved spouse or the public, necessarily follow, as do discussions of redemption. The institutions that the wrong doer represents may require a similar process of spiritual healing and renewal, gained variously through introspection, expulsion of evil doers, and an invigorated commitment to the common good.

The instances in which intimate knowledge becomes most problematic, Zelizer argues, are when it enters unusual or unanticipated domains, such as sexual intimacies being sold or advertised for sale. An example involving religion would be religious sentiments that formerly were private or kept as privileged information between a practitioner and a clergy person becoming public. If personal prayer requests are circulated on the internet, for instance, do the same norms apply as if they were shared in a fellowship group, or must the most intimate information be edited out?

Christopher Wildeman’s (2008) study of online prayer requests for deployed soldiers and incarcerated men demonstrates, not surprisingly, that strong norms prevent negative assessments of soldiers from being included, but also suggests that all requests are sanitized of intimate revelations. As a different example, when a truth and reconciliation commission writes a public confession about an atrocity, should the same language be used as if the confession were about an indiscretion in an intimate relationship, or would that be inappropriate?
Studies that have examined this question suggest that a language of personal confession, forgiveness, sacrifice, and redemption is especially meaningful for victims, but also stress the importance of a different language that focuses on legal rights, economic justice, and democratic procedures (Krog 2000, Wilson 2001, Gobodo-Madikizela and van der Merwe 2009).

Or, on yet a different topic, can a public display of art be defined sufficiently as art that excrement can be included? What if the art also includes a religious figure? The photography of Andres Serrano in which a crucifix was show submerged in urine, the performance rituals of Karen Finley that combined feces and religious gestures, and the controversial “Sensation” exhibit in New York City in which dung appeared on an image of the Virgin Mary have forcefully brought these juxtapositions to the attention of religious leaders, art critics, and researchers in recent years (DiMaggio et al. 2001, Beasley 2004, Vosburgh 2001, Robinson 2000, Wuthnow 2003).

These examples suggest that intimate knowledge is often a consideration in broader discussions about the so-called privatization or de-privatization of religion (Casanova 1994). On the one hand, the privatization of religion is evident in its association with intimate spaces and intimate language, such as faith-based dieting and weight loss programs, sex and marriage counseling, and an emphasis on moods and feelings. The hallmarks of privatization include a focus on domestic relationships, performing therapeutic functions, and helping individuals cope with adjustments to their self identity.

On the other hand, these intimacies are more often exposed to public display by virtue of legal and constitutional debates, the mass media, and political controversies. A
public school board official who meets for prayer with a friend at a local café may need a special law to prevent that meeting from being considered “on the record.” A political candidate participating in a healing ritual at her church may find a video of the event posted on YouTube. A person who quietly hums a comforting hymn to herself while gardening may relate differently to the tune when she hears it as background music for an oil and gas conglomerate commercial.

As a final example of intimate knowledge playing an interesting role at the intersection of religion and public life, here is a speculative possibility. The fact that intimate knowledge is often something that a person holds as a secret suggests asking the question, what does it mean when a person says, I’ve got a secret?

Among school children, that often means I have something that you do not, so I have power over you and you must do what I say in order to learn my secret. The child who claims to have a secret, for example, can extract candy or money or help with homework from another child in return for sharing his secret. But once the secret is shared, its value to the person who shared it is significantly reduced. To maintain its full value, the secret must not be shared. If the idea is to hold it over someone else, then the fact of having a secret must be communicated even though the secret itself is not. However, it is also possible to elevate one’s own sense of power to oneself by having a secret and keeping that knowledge completely to oneself (or to a trusted confidant).

The kind of secret that only the person with the secret knows about is the deepest form of intimate knowledge, and may in fact be the source of a special kind of power or personal gratification. In *Seductions of Crime* (1988:52-79), for example, Jack Katz argues that “sneaky thrills,” such as shoplifting, housebreaking, and employee theft, are
the source of a special sensuality that may be more the reason for engaging in these petty crimes than the actual goods acquired. Part of the thrill is having a secret that confers on one’s undisclosed self a kind of transcendence and mystique that remains unknown even to co-workers and friends. The thrill is amplified by an obsessive desire, on the one hand, to reveal the secret and, on the other hand, by a nagging fear that the secret is “written all over one’s face” or somehow betrayed in a person’s posture or speech.

By the same logic, it may be this kind of power or gratification that helps make sense of the seeming frequency with which sex scandals occur among religious leaders and, for that matter, among elected officials and celebrities as well. The connection is perhaps evident in the statements typically offered by those involved once the secret has become public, namely, that they thought they were not bound by the rules governing other people and that they did it because they could. If these reasons are viewed, not as prior motives, but as accounts given after the fact, and thus as interpretations that may have been prompted by the act rather than preceding it, then the implication may be that the secretive act was itself a source of the person feeling empowered. Like the school child who says, I have a secret, the person involved in an illicit affair experiences a sense of power. Doing something that nobody knows about, and indeed that nobody can know about, elevates the person’s sense of power even beyond whatever power may be present because of holding a position of authority.

Conclusion

I have suggested that intimate knowledge is a concept that could usefully be the focus of research in studies of religion on topics as diverse as perceptions of God’s
knowledge of a person’s intimate life, to perceptions of how best to attain intimate knowledge about God, to understandings in congregations about who has the best access to such knowledge. I have argued that intimate knowledge is of particular interest in studies seeking to understand the bases of clergy authority and the manner in which confession and other disclosures of intimate information occurs in congregations.

My examples from research on immigrant congregations show that secrets and presumed secrets about undocumented immigrants are an interesting way in which the management of intimate knowledge varies among congregations. Further possibilities for research on intimate knowledge occur in studies of such information being shared in social networks, used to buttress moral claims, and emerging in public revelations about sex scandals.

For researchers an important caveat is that research itself frequently involves asking for information about sensitive topics that may include disclosures of intimate knowledge. Ethical considerations clearly apply. Rules governing research on human subjects provide guidelines about protecting the anonymity of subjects and keeping confidential information under lock and key.

But close attention to the language respondents use in interviews and the contexts in which they reveal information in ethnographic studies is necessary as well. Being the recipient of such information, a researcher must be prepared to consider why it was disclosed and what effect it may have. Anthropologist Susan Harding’s (2000) story of interviewing a fundamentalist pastor who told her about accidentally killing his own son is an important reminder of the power of such disclosures. By the conclusion of the interview, Harding — a nonbeliever — felt she was being convicted by the Holy Spirit.
References


