Faith, Politics, and the Life Story

Interview Protocol
The Foley Center for the Study of Lives
Fourth Revision: March 2005

Introductory Comments

This interview is about three things: your personal faith, your political beliefs and values, and the story of your life. We are interested in how Americans today understand the relationship between these three things. What role, for example, does your religious or spiritual life play in the way you approach political and social issues? How would you say that you have developed or changed over time with respect to faith and politics in your life? Have certain events or things that have happened in your personal life had an impact on your religious or political beliefs, values, and commitments?

The interview begins with the *life story*. I am going to ask you first of all to think about your life as if it were a book or a play, containing chapters, scenes, main characters, and so on. We will focus in briefly on what you believe to be a few key scenes or episodes in your story – some high points, low points, and turning points, for example. The purpose of the first part of the interview is to compose a very brief autobiography for you by highlighting a few critical scenes in the story.

The second part of the interview will focus on your *faith*. We asked you to participate in this study because of your strong involvement in a religious or spiritual tradition. We want to understand your beliefs and religious or spiritual practices, and we want you to tell us a bit about the role of religion or spirituality in your life overall.

Finally, we will consider politics and society. I am going to ask you a series of specific questions about your political views and activities – who you have voted for, for example, why you vote, what guides your political choices, what kind of society you would like to live in, and how your personal faith is involved with this, if at all. For this third part of the interview, I am going to focus some attention on the 2004 U.S. Presidential election. As you know, this was a very close and bitterly contested election, with strong views on both sides. It was also an election in which faith and values figured prominently, at least according to some experts who have studied the race. We want to know where you stand, or stood, on this past election and how you make sense of it all, now that it is over.

I think you will find the interview enjoyable and interesting.

Do you have any questions for me?
The Life Story

We would like you to begin by thinking of your life in general as if it were a kind of story or play. All stories have characters, plots, chapters, scenes, and so forth. We would like you to focus in on a few key scenes that stand out in the story. Each of these scenes would be an event or a moment in your life that you now consider to be, or to have been, important in some way. I am going to ask you to describe 8 key scenes in your life. For each one, I will ask you to describe the event in detail, what happened and when, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling in the event, and what you now think, looking back on it, the event may have meant in the context of your overall story and your understanding of who you are today. For each scene, furthermore, you may need to give a little background information from your life, some context so that we can understand better why the scene is meaningful in your story. In sum, then, I want you to describe each of 8 key life events in detail and to tell me why you now consider each event to be important in your story.

Scene #1: High point.

The first scene is a high point, or what some people might call a “peak experience.” This would be an event in your life that was so positive or wonderful that you now look back on it as one of the high points of your entire life. It would be a moment or episode in your story in which you experienced extremely positive feelings of some sort, such as joy, excitement, happiness, or inner peace. Please choose one scene like this in your life story. Describe it for me in detail. Make sure to tell me what led up to the scene, so that I can understand it in context. What happened in the scene? Where and when did it happen? What were you thinking and feeling in the event? Why is it an important event? What impact has this event had on who you are today?

Scene #2: Low point.

The second scene is the opposite of the first – a low point in your life story. Thinking back over your entire life, try to remember a specific experience or event in which you felt extremely negative emotions, such as deep sadness, fear, strong anxiety, terror, despair, guilt, shame, etc. This does not necessarily have to be the worst thing that ever happened in your life, if you are not comfortable talking about that. But it should be something pretty bad. Even though this memory is unpleasant, I would appreciate your attempt to be as honest and detailed as you can be in describing it. What led up to this negative scene? What happened in the event? Who was involved? Where and when did it happen? What were you thinking and feeling in the event? Why is it an important event? What impact has this low-point event had on who you are today?

Scene #3: Turning point.

In looking back on your life, you may be able to identify particular “turning points” – episodes through which you experienced an important change in your life. Please choose one key turning point scene and describe it in detail. If you feel your life
story contains no clear turning points, then describe a particular episode in your life that comes closer than any other to qualifying for a turning point – a scene where you changed in some way. Again, please describe what led up to the event, what happened in the event, where and when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, and so on. Also, please tell me how you think you changed as a result of this event and why you consider this event to be an important scene in your life story today.

Scene #4: Positive childhood memory.

The fourth scene is an early memory from childhood that was emotionally positive. Please go back in time and try to recall a scene from your childhood, as early as possible, that today stands out as vivid or important in some way and which you experienced at the time in an emotionally positive way. This would be a “good” memory from childhood. Please describe this positive scene from childhood in detail. What led up to this event? When and where did it happen? Who was involved? What were you thinking and feeling? Why is it an important event? What impact did it have on you?

Scene #5: Negative childhood memory.

The fifth scene is an early memory from childhood that was emotionally negative. Please go back in time and try to recall a scene from your childhood, as early as possible, that today stands out as vivid or important in some way and which you experienced at the time in an emotionally negative way. This would be a “bad” memory from childhood. Please describe this negative scene from childhood in detail. What led up to this event? When and where did it happen? Who was involved? What were you thinking and feeling? Why is it an important event? What impact did it have on you?

Scene #6: Adolescent memory.

The sixth scene is a vivid or important memory from your teen-aged years. It can be emotionally positive or emotionally negative. Describe a particular event from your teen-aged years that stands out in your memory today. What led up to the event? What happened? Where and when? Who was involved? What were you thinking and feeling? Why is it an important event? What impact did the event have on you?

Scene #7: Adult memory.

The seventh scene is a vivid or important memory from any time in your adult years. Again, this can be positive or negative. It can be about anything – family, work, whatever. The scene stands out in your mind today as being especially vivid or important. Please describe what led up to the event. Then describe the scene in detail. What happened? Where and when? Who was involved? What were you thinking and feeling? Why is it an important event? What impact has the event had on you?

Scene #8: Idealized future scene.
For the eighth and final scene, I am going to ask you to do something a little different. Your life story is not only about the past as you remember it, but it also includes the future as you imagine it today. Imagine the future now, rather than the past. I want you to imagine a scene from the future in your life story. I want you to imagine a very positive scene in the future. This would be an event or happening that could realistically happen in your life in the future sometime. Imagine just such an event and describe what it might be like. What might happen? Who might be involved? What might you be thinking and feeling in this future event? Why would this event be important? What impact might this imagined future event have on you, if indeed this event were to happen in the future?

Faith

The second part of the interview focuses on personal faith and your religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices. Here I am also going to ask you to think about things in story terms – to imagine your religious or spiritual life as if it were a story developing over time. I will ask you to identify a few key scenes in the story. But I will also ask more basic, factual questions about your faith life, so that I can better understand your beliefs, values, and practices.

Overall orientation: Beliefs and values.

Let us then begin by considering the spiritual and/or religious dimensions of your life in general. Please describe your overall religious or spiritual approach to life. What are your basic beliefs and values?

Practices.

Faith involves things we believe, but it also involves things we do, such as worship, prayer, liturgy, singing, meditation, witnessing, and so on. You have already told me a little bit about your beliefs and values. Now please describe any spiritual or religious practices in your life. As a spiritual or religious person, what do you do that affirms your faith or puts your faith into action? Why do you do these things?

Prayer.

Many Christians pray. Do you ever pray? [If participant says “no,” ask why. Then proceed to next question.] When and under what circumstances do you pray? If it is okay with you, I would like you to give me an example of a prayer you might offer to God. Tell me what you might “say” to God. Please narrate the prayer to me. Why might you offer that particular prayer to God? [If the participant is not comfortable doing this, then ask him or her simply to tell you what he or she prays about.]

Beginning scene.
I want to understand how you became the religious or spiritual person you are today. Might you be able to identify a particular scene in your life – from childhood or after – that stands out as an important beginning in your faith life? This might be a scene that shows how you entered into religious or spiritual life, an opening scene, as it were, in your faith story. Perhaps it is a scene in which faith became important to you for the first time. Please describe the scene in detail. When and where did it occur? Who was involved? What were you thinking and feeling at the time? Why is this scene important?

**High point scene.**

Please describe a scene in your life having to do with your religion or spirituality that stands out today as a high point. This would be the most positive religious or spiritual event or moment in your life. If no single moment stands out, please choose an event from your religious or spiritual life that you look back on today as having been especially positive or fulfilling. Please describe the scene in detail. When and where did it occur? Who was involved? What were you thinking and feeling at the time? Why is this scene important to you today?

**Low point scene.**

Now, please try to identify a scene in your life having to do with your religion or spirituality that stands out today as a low point. This would be a negative religious or spiritual experience. It might be a period of profound doubt or questioning, a period of fear or sadness in your spiritual life, a time when your religious or spiritual orientation to life reached a very negative level in some sense. Please describe the scene in detail. When and where did it occur? Who was involved? What were you thinking and feeling at the time? How did the scene resolve itself? Why is this scene important to you today?

**Continuity and change.**

Faith involves both continuity and change in life. In some ways, you have probably changed a great deal over the course of your life with respect to your faith. In other ways, you have probably remained the same. How have your religious or spiritual beliefs and practices changed over time? And how have they remained stable?

**Alternative stories.**

Please imagine for a moment a very different life story than the one you now live. Imagine that you had no faith – that you lived a life without God, without religion or spirituality. What would that life be like? How would it feel? I am particularly interested in learning from you what kinds of emotions you might feel if your life were without God, without faith.

**Other.**
What else can you tell me that would help me understand the role of faith, religion, and/or spirituality in your life?

**Politics**

As promised, the third and final part of the interview focuses on politics. In interviews we have done in the past, we have found that people have virtually no trouble talking about their life stories and about their religious faith. When it comes to politics, however, things sometimes do not go so smoothly. This seems to be an area where people either have little to say or they want to argue. Here we hope you will feel free to say what you feel and believe. We are interviewing people with widely differing political views – Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, and so on. In order to understand these different viewpoints (how they differ, and what they may have in common), we have designed a few questions to challenge people’s views. One of the goals of this interview is to collect very different, contrasting political views from people for whom faith is important in their lives. Please realize that we are not trying to push any particular political agenda here. We want to understand all sides on the political questions, and we want to understand how people’s political views are related, if at all, to their religious and spiritual values and to their life stories overall.

**Overall orientation: Political beliefs and values.**

How would you characterize your overall orientation to politics? Do you see yourself as conservative, liberal, or what? Please describe your political beliefs and values in some detail.

**Development**

Please describe how your political beliefs and values were formed and how they may have changed over the course of your life. How might they change in the future?

**Practices.**

In what ways have you participated in the political process? Do you usually vote? Do you donate time or money to political efforts? Have you participated in political rallies or protests? Describe any involvements and activities in your life that you consider to be part of the political process.

**Life-story scene.**

Please describe a particular scene in your life story that involves politics in some way. This could be an event in which you learned about politics, developed political views, participated in the political process, or whatever. Please describe what happened in the event, where and when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking
and feeling, and why you consider this political event in your life to be important for your life story.

*Faith and politics.*

How, if at all, does your faith – that is your religious and/or spiritual beliefs, values, and practices – influence your politics? Please describe in detail what you see to be the relationship between faith and politics in your life.

*The 2004 Presidential election.*

Whom did you vote for in the 2004 Presidential election?

*Questions for Bush/Republican voters.*

I am now going to ask you a few questions about your choice to vote for President Bush in the 2004 election.

1. Why did you vote for President Bush? Please tell me the main reasons you voted for him and not for Senator John Kerry.

2. In what ways, if any, did your faith – that is your religious or spiritual beliefs, values, and practices – influence your decision to vote for President Bush?

3. As you know, many committed Christians voted for President Bush in the 2004 election. But many committed Christians also voted for Senator Kerry. Even though you voted for President Bush, let us take the other side for a moment and imagine why a religious or spiritual person would vote for Kerry over Bush. What do you think? Why might a strongly religious or spiritual person – let us say, for the sake of argument, a strong Christian – have voted for Senator Kerry over President Bush in 2004?

4. Christians who favored John Kerry in the last election might argue that Jesus lived among the poor, fed and healed the poor, and generally exalted the poor and downtrodden over the rich and the religious elite. With that in mind, they criticize President Bush and the Republican Party in general for cutting taxes mainly for the wealthy and cutting services of many kinds that are aimed at helping the poor, the working class, and others who struggle economically in American society. They argue that Senator Kerry and the Democrats are more willing to focus on the needs of people who struggle, the disadvantaged, and others to whom Christian charity should be aimed. What do you think about these arguments?

*Questions for Kerry/Democrat voters*

I am now going to ask you a series of questions about your choice to vote for John Kerry in the 2004 election.
1. Why did you vote for Senator Kerry? Please tell me the main reasons you voted for him and not for George W. Bush.

2. In what ways, if any, did your faith – that is your religious or spiritual beliefs, values, and practices – influence your decision to vote for John Kerry?

3. Many Christians and other religious people voted for John Kerry in the 2004 election. But as you know, many other Christians voted for President Bush. Even though you voted for Senator Kerry, let us take the other side for a moment and imagine why a religious or spiritual person would vote for Bush over Kerry. What do you think? Why might a strongly religious or spiritual person – let us say, for the sake of argument, a strong Christian – have voted for President Bush over Senator Kerry in 2004?

4. Christians who favored George Bush over John Kerry in the last election might argue that President Bush and the Republicans share their Christian values while Democrats do not. The President and many Republicans have consistently supported faith-based organizations and initiatives. They are more favorably inclined toward prayer in public schools and affirming the Ten Commandments and other religious precepts. They argue that American society should support human life in all its forms, including the unborn fetus. President Bush has often spoken, in very moving ways, about the power of religious faith in his own life. What do you think about these arguments?

*Final question for everybody.*

For all their shortcomings, politics and religion aim to make the world a better place for future generations. Both Republicans and Democrats believe they are doing the right thing for their children and for the next generation. In what ways do you believe that you are working to make the world a better place for future generations? How are you seeking to make a positive difference? Please describe what you consider to be your positive contributions in this regard in any and all realms of your life – work, family, church, friendships, volunteer activity, community involvement, or any other areas you think are important.

*Is there anything you would like to add?*