# Omega Graduate School

# Dissertation Research Prospectus (Pre-Proposal)

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#  Problem Statement

The Christian worldview of former Christian college/university students is disrupted after social pressures that precede their experience of cognitive dissonance leading to their deconversion from Christianity.

# Purpose Statement

The purpose for this qualitative study is to discover what social pressures precede former Christian college/university students’ experience of cognitive dissonance affecting the disruption of their Christian worldview leading to their deconversion.

# Background of the Problem (1-2 pages)

According to recent reports from Pew Research Center, large amounts of millennials are leaving the Christian Church in the United States, with only 49 percent currently identifying as Christian. That is 16 percent drop from ten years prior (Pew Research Center 2019, 8). This is in stark contrast to their parents’ generations, with 69 percent of generation X and 76 percent of baby boomers still identifying as Christian (Pew Research Center 2019, 8).

There are various factors that contribute to deconversion from Christianity. Factors that contribute to deconversion from Christianity being revealed by the data include “explicating themes of judgmental,” “can no longer relate,” “people of the church do not understand ideas,” etc. There are a handful of key factors, such as doubting that same-sex marriage is morally wrong and believing that the church is out of touch with their lives. There were more negatively worded items utilized in regard to deconversion.

Religious deconversion has sociological, psychological, and theological elements. Deconversion involves numerous and significant changes for ex-Christians as they relinquish their Christian worldview for its opposite, atheism. Because worldviews both construct and provide access to reality, the exchange of worldviews that are so contrary to each has major impact on the life of the former Christian.

Questions about how has adopting an atheistic worldview changes or affects the values, a sense of identity, social relationships, and the moral beliefs and behaviors of former Christians are open to investigation, being given the present state of the literature that addresses Christian deconversion to atheism. Being located throughout the United States are numerous social groups and clubs consisting of former Christians. There are also many atheist websites and forums online. Interacting with and interviewing members of such groups can provide the raw data necessary for a theory of deconversion that is lacking in the literature.

The motivating factors and structural processes of religious exits have been important inquiries in the sociology of religion and are increasingly important to the field of non-religious studies.

However, there is another aspect to the appearance of deconversion. Through examining narratives of deconversion, there are evangelical exits from a deconversion perspective that are not horizontal, but they are lateral moves where those who exit emphasize breaking away from the constraints of “hegemonic Christianity” rather than turning to secularity. The findings suggest that framing the intentional rejection of faith as ‘deconversion’ transforms exit narratives into merely a cultural phenomenon where exiters are not deconverting but instead are challenging religious dominations. In more than one study, it has been argued that Millennials and Generation Z are not leaving the church; they are reconstructing their faith and distancing themselves from fundamentalism. It appears that there is a generational shift in ecclesiology and a generational disconnect. It was alleged that new form of evangelicalism and the dissonance of Millennials and Generation Z is the result from what they assert is an evangelicalism that is characterized by sexism, racism, homophobia, and nationalism, instead of the foundational tenets of Christianity.

There is another phenomenon that has become known as Exvangelicalism. In the literature, there are three broad findings with the understanding that religious disaffiliation is a socially-mediated experience. Exvangelicals borrow from a repertoire of culturally-available narrative themes (emergence/redemption, trauma/survival, ride-the-current) to create meaning for their exit experiences. Exvangelicals' religio-spiritual identity might be categorized in five stages: first doubts, or pre-articulation; coming out to self and select others; exploration of alternatives; relationship reconstruction; and identity synthesis.

Many leaving from the Christian Church, or specific traditions within it, describe their experience as a “deconstruction” of their original faith. Exvangelicals are incorporating the deconstruction from philosopher Jacques Derrida. It has become popularized in Christian circles by those engaging in the philosophical critique of Christianity. That phenomenon of millennial faith deconstruction is no surprise. Although seekers of many generations are undergoing shifts in spiritual identity, given their experience and exposure, millennials as a generation are ripe for deconstruction (McLaren 2021, xiv).

The question that remains at large is what social factor(s) is contributing to the initial cognitive dissonance, which is the point of inception for the subsequent departure through deconversion, disaffiliation, or deconstruction.

# Significance

This study will contribute to the gap in research through identifying the social pressures that precede former Christian college/university students’ experience of cognitive dissonance affecting the disruption of their Christian worldview leading to their deconversion.

# Research Questions

RQ1: What social pressures preceded the experience of cognitive dissonance?

RQ2: What are the various types of social pressures?

RQ3: Which type of social pressure was most prominent and why?

# Research Methodology

This study will utilize a qualitative methodology because research questions will be answered through inductive coding and exploratory thematic analysis.

# Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The guiding psychological theory for this study is cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance was first studied by Leon Festinger (1957), stemming from participants who observed a study of a cult, which believed that the earth was going to be destroyed by a disaster. This resulted in people quitting their jobs and leaving their homes, all to become a part of the cult that purportedly was protected from the imminent disaster.

# Instrumentation

Researcher-developed and field-tested questionnaire, interview, or focus group (qualitative)...

This study will utilize a field-tested researcher-developed questionnaire validated by feedback from 5-7 subject matter experts…

# Research Design

Basic Qualitative: explore emergent themes from open-ended participant responses (qualitative, inductive)

This qualitative study utilizes a basic qualitative design because it explores what social pressures precede former Christian college/university students’ experience of cognitive dissonance affecting the disruption of their Christian worldview leading to their deconversion.

# Population and Sampling

The target population for this study is the social group of former Christian college/university students who deconverted from Christianity and now might be found in various forums on the internet.

# Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative:

This study will utilize manual coding and Creswell and Poth’s Data Analysis Spiral for data analysis: Step One: Managing and organizing the data (data preparation), Step Two: Reading and memoing emergent ideas, Step Three: Describing and classifying codes into themes, Step Four: Developing and assessing interpretations, Step Five: Representing and visualizing the data.