# Omega Graduate School

# Dissertation Research Prospectus (Pre-Proposal)

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# Problem Statement

Summary of the Problem

Students who have purported that they were Christians deconvert from Christianity after they have attended a secular college/university.

According to the literature, three sequential stages might be subdivided into seven contiguous events in a process of deconversion from Christianity for former Christian students having been attending a secular college or university. In the initial stage, (1) an adequate episode of traumatic social pressure occurs, after which (2) a person’s anxiety buffer is disrupted. In the intermediate stage, (3) an interruption of external claims into the worldview system precedes (4) a generation of cognitive dissonance. In the last stage, (5) the resolution to cognitive dissonance precedes (6) the realization that the worldview system has been transformed. After both (5) and (6) have been completed, (7) a private or public declaration becomes necessary. Following those three consecutive events, the process of deconversion from Christianity is finalized.

Delineation of the Problem with Citations

After an adequate episode of traumatic social pressure has occurred, a person’s anxiety buffer might be disrupted. (Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2011) Antecedent episodes and subsequent disruption are integral parts of the initial stage in a process of deconversion from Christianity for former Christian students having been attending a secular college or university. (Marriott, 2023)

After a disruption of a student’s anxiety buffer, there might be an interruption of external claims into the worldview system. (Edmondson et al., 2011) That interruption of external claims might generate a cognitive dissonance of residential claims and those external claims having been introduced into the student’s worldview system. (Iqbal, Radulescu, Bains, & Aleem, 2019) The interruption of external claims and subsequent generation of cognitive dissonance are integral parts of an intermediate stage in a process of deconversion from Christianity for former Christian students. (Lee, 2023)

The last stage in a process of deconversion from Christianity might be separated into three consecutive events: resolution, realization, and declaration. (Starr, Waldo & Kauffman, 2019)

First, the resolution to cognitive dissonance might be accomplished in partial transformation of the worldview system through (a) disintegrating and rejecting the residential claims being contrary to those external claims that were introduced into the worldview system and (b) integrating the external claims that were assimilated through (3) the interruption of external claims into the worldview system until a semblance of cognitive consonance is attained (i.e., consonance of those residential claims [remaining after disintegration and rejection] and those external claims having been introduced. (Rousseau & Billingham, 2018)

Second, after cognitive consonance has been attained, realization that the partial transformation of the worldview system is such that recategorization of the worldview system is imperative. (Gull, 2022)

Third, a private or public declaration becomes necessary. (Fazzino, 2014)

The completion of resolution, realization, and declaration is not merely the cessation of the last stage, but is the termination of the process of deconversion from Christianity for those former Christian students having been attending a secular college or university, whereby the parts are construed to be a separately alternative worldview system.

References for Delineation of the Problem

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# Purpose Statement

The purpose for this qualitative study is to compare each testimony of those to be surveyed and the seven contiguous events. It is surmised that both the chronological sequence and the categorical equivalence are congruent; that is, there are two hypothetical claims being surmised: (1) the seven contiguous events being proposed conceptually should be recognizable in each testimony of those to be surveyed, and (2) the chronological sequence of those conceptually contiguous events also should be recognizable in each testimony.

# Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

For this study, the following are presumed as integral parts of the collective conceptual framework being proposed: Developmental Systems Theory (DST), the Anxiety Buffer Disruption Theory (ABDT) which is incapsulated in the Terror Management Theory (TMT). The following worldview framework is utilized for Christian worldview: Christian Worldview Scale.

# Background of the Problem (1-2 pages)

**Pew Research & Deconversion**

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).

**Deconversion & Sociology of Religion**

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.

**Exvangelicalism**

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.

**Worldview as System & Anxiety Buffer Disruption**

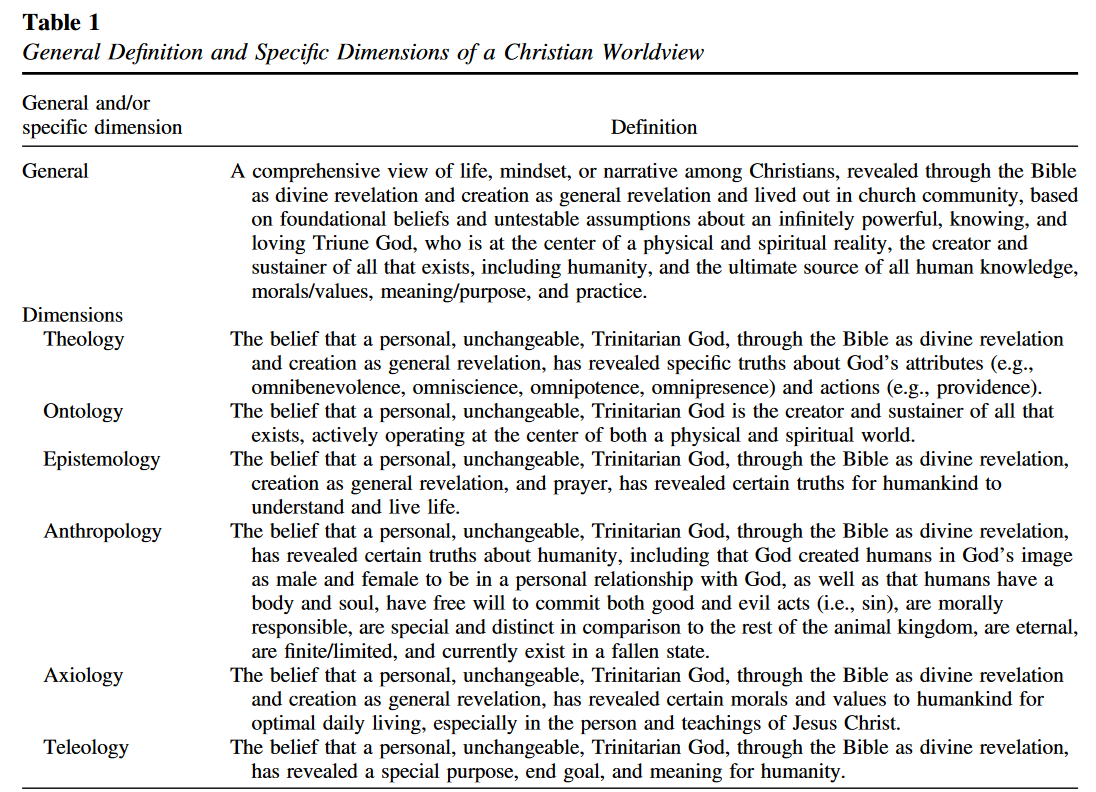
Seeing that “a worldview is a system and hence is most appropriately studied from a system perspective” (Rousseau, 2018, p. 5), it follows a fortiori that understanding the nature of systems is paramount for studying the nature of the worldview system. Thus, the nature of a worldview system should be examined in order to ascertain the reason(s) why external claims might be interrupted into a person’s worldview system.

The structure of a worldview system is not simplex. The structural components of a worldview system are complex, seeing that there are many integrative subcomponents. In that type of system, the complex subcomponents are subject to

High levels of change, uncertainty, and interrelations among the subsystems. Thus, its behavior cannot be deduced from the study of its elements independently since the complexity of a system is determined by the volume of information needed to understand the behavior of this system as a whole and the degree of detail necessary to describe it. (Dayarathna, 2021, p. 3)

So, what is the correct amount of complex subcomponents that might be constituted, whereby we could know the dimensional framework of a worldview system? There is no consensus. Nevertheless, there is one framework that might be utilized to treat the worldview system in an interdisciplinary manner. According to De Witt (2015), “The IWF [Integrative Worldview Framework] is an interdisciplinary framework that synthesizes original empirical research with research from a number of fields, notably developmental-structural psychology and sociology, including the extensive, cross-cultural, longitudinal database of the World Values Survey.” (p. 908) De Witt (2015) includes five subcomponents in the integrative worldview system: “The IWF operationalizes worldviews into five major aspects (ontology, epistemology, axiology, anthropology, and societal vision), and offers a synoptic overview of the major, ideal-typical worldviews in the West, referred to as traditional, modern, postmodern, and integrative.” (p. 908)

However, other dimensions might be included as fundamental subcomponents in a worldview system; thus, some lists have several more subcomponents than De Witt’s list in the IWF. Despite the wide range of IWF’s applicability to many worldview systems, for the specific purpose of inquiry into Christian worldview systems, it seems that it would be imprudent to utilize a framework that has not been accommodated to the unique nature of Christian worldview systems. Wherefore, I propose the Christian Worldview Scale (CWS) to be a conceptual framework that is more adequate than other conceptual frameworks. The nature of CWS is *emic* (i.e., “relating to or denoting an approach to the study or description of a particular language or culture in terms of its internal elements and their functioning rather than in terms of any existing external framework”) and acknowledges the scope of the various Christian branches “(e.g., Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant) or denominational affiliation (e.g., Baptist, Church of Christ, Methodist).” The following table was presented by Knabb et al. (2022), the originators of the CWS.



The most important addition in the CWS that might not be found in sundry other conceptual frameworks is the dimension of theology. However, it seems that a caveat here is necessary. That dimension should not be understood as paramount to broad studies, such as systematic theology or philosophical theology. Instead, it is similar to the other dimensions in the CWS, such as ontology or epistemology where it is understood that the terms are utilized to refer to an aspect of the theological spectrum. For example, when the dimension of epistemology is utilized, we would want to know if the person is an empiricist or rationalist, or if the person is an epistemic relativist, etc.

Since one pertinent question concerns what precedes the interruption of external claims into a worldview system, we should examine the potential ways that a worldview system might be vulnerable to an interruption. One avenue of vulnerability is associated to what is an inseparable characteristic of every worldview system: the assumption of various claims that reflect an aspect of the world from the perspective of the person purporting the worldview system; for example, the assumptive claim that the world is not a malevolent place. So, what happens to those claims in assumption when there is a traumatic event? Edmondson et al. (2009) indicate that

According to shattered assumptions theory, when individuals experience an event that damages their worldview (i.e., traumatic material that cannot be easily integrated with previously held worldviews), they no longer perceive the world as benevolent and predictable or themselves as competent and invulnerable … While worldview-based models are intuitively compelling to many researchers and clinicians, they must be judged on the validity of their central premise: Trauma symptoms are caused by shattering of worldviews. (p. 9)

Though the value of Shattered Assumptions Theory is not disputed, Anxiety Buffer Disruption Theory (ABDT) exceeds the applicable notion of “shattered assumptions” since “shattered assumptions theory emphasizes the often unarticulated (and, perhaps, unobservable) cognitive discrepancies between worldview and traumatic material” whereas “ABDT focuses on the (observable) disruption of worldview functioning.” (Edmondson et al., 2011, p. 362) Other beneficial aspects of ABDT have been demonstrated by Pyszczynski & Taylor (2016):

Whereas shattered assumptions theory posits that traumatic events lead to PTSD by undermining one's core assumptions about life, anxiety buffer disruption theory adds that such events produce their detrimental effects by disrupting the protection from anxiety that one's worldview, self-esteem, and interpersonal attachments normally provide ... (p. 287)

Furthermore, it has been postulated that a function of our worldview is the provision of a buffer for episodes of traumatic events so that we may continue operating in our daily lives and may avert psychological paralysis resulting from fear and anxiety. In the following statements, Pyszczynski & Taylor (2016) explain the function of the anxiety-buffer:

To avert threats, anxiety in response to awareness of an inevitable fact of life would both interfere with effective behavior and make conscious experience extremely aversive. To manage this problem, people employ an anxiety-buffering system consisting of cultural worldviews (e.g., beliefs, values, assumptions about reality), self-esteem that is derived from living up to the standards prescribed by one's worldviews, and close interpersonal relationships. (p. 286)

Though the general nature of an anxiety-buffer is protective, nevertheless it is like a pervious membrane through which there might be unencumbered exchange of minor residential claims that are integral parts of a person’s worldview. That nature of interaction and the nature of the worldview as an internal system with externally influential interactivity are conceptually congruent. So, the natural state of a worldview is a closed but not impervious system. There are various components that are integrated, but the systematic nature of the worldview is such that the logic is non-monotonic, thereby it is possible for both additional and subtractional claims, whereby the system does not collapse though there might be interruption into the system. However, when the nature of an episode is traumatic, the anxiety-buffer becomes overwhelmed if the level of trauma is severe or repetitive. What follows from that type of traumatic episode is detrimental to the anxiety-buffer. Vail et. al (2019) note that “according to anxiety buffer disruption theory … traumatic experiences potentially disrupt those buffer systems ...” (p. 647) Fear is also a natural part of life, nevertheless how each person responds to it is not the same. Thus, according to Pyszczynski & Taylor (2016),

To manage this problem, people employ an anxiety-buffering system consisting of cultural worldviews (e.g., beliefs, values, assumptions about reality), self-esteem that is derived from living up to the standards prescribed by one's worldviews, and close interpersonal relationships. Anxiety is effectively controlled when people are confident in the validity of their worldviews, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships. (p. 286)

The function of the anxiety-buffer is protective for a person’s worldview system that becomes susceptible to an interruption when the anxiety-buffer is unhealthy. It follows that a healthy anxiety-buffer is necessary for effective resistance. The functional nature of the healthy anxiety-buffer has been corroborated through extensive research. Thus, Pyszczynski & Taylor (2016) stated that “Over 500 studies conducted across myriad countries and cultures have provided converging evidence for the role of cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships in managing anxiety.” (p. 287)

References for Delineation of the Problem

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Vail, K. E. I., Goncy, E. A., & Edmondson, D. (2019). Anxiety buffer disruption: Worldview threat, death thought accessibility, and worldview defense among low and high posttraumatic stress symptom samples. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *11*(6), 647–655. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000441.supp>

# Significance

This study will contribute to the gap in research through identifying which episodes of traumatic social pressure precede the disruption of the anxiety buffer. Antecedent episodes and subsequent disruption are integral parts of the initial stage in a process of deconversion from Christianity for former Christian students having been attending a secular college or university.

# Research Questions

RQ1: What relevant episodes of traumatic social pressure precede the disruption of the anxiety buffer?

RQ2: What are the various types of episodes of traumatic social pressure?

RQ3: Which type of relevant episodes of traumatic 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

For this study, the following are presumed as integral parts of the collective theoretical framework: Developmental Systems Theory (DST), the Anxiety Buffer Disruption Theory (ABDT) which is incapsulated in the Terror Management Theory (TMT). The following conceptual framework is utilized for Christian worldview: Christian Worldview Scale.

# 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 interruption into 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.

**I enjoyed reading your prospectus for SR 812-78, Richard! You did a good job with your problem statement about the deconversion of Christian college students. Your theoretical framework needs development. Your data collection plan through qualitative interview questions needs to designate a participant population size. Ten would adequate. You provided nice scholarly citations to support your literature review, but the two separate lists need to be collated at the end under your Works Cited. Keep up the great work! -- Prof. Ward**