

“Disciples by Default”: Women’s Narratives of Leaving Alternative Religious Movements

by

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Bachelor of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, 2017

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the School of Child and Youth Care

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University of Victoria

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Abstract

The study of alternative religious movements (ARMs) encompasses a wide range of groups, from Fundamentalist Mormons to Scientologists to Jehovah's Witnesses. There is, however, little research, and almost none of it from a therapeutic perspective, on the experiences of children who are raised in these groups. This leads me to wonder about the stories of women who are raised in and then exit ARMs and how these stories might inform the work of helping professionals. This thesis provides a narrative analysis of memoirs written by women who were raised in and then left alternative religions. Through the lens of deconstruction and post-structuralist feminism, it considers the ways in which women who have left ARMs narrate their experiences and how their stories might inform practice. Findings indicate that the women experienced a life marked by a pervasive sense of difference (though not always expressed in a negative sense). Long periods of managing doubt, dissonance, and disenchantment resulted in exhaustion. In the context of an expanding world and motivated by relationships with those outside their religious groups, they experienced deconversion and, eventually, disaffiliation. Disaffiliation was experienced both as frightening and liberating, resulting in the need to construct new identities and sites of belonging outside their religious groups. I have displayed these findings in the form of a model of religious deconversion and disaffiliation. This research may help child and youth care workers, therapists, social workers, and other helpers develop wise practices when working with those who have been raised in ARMs.

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Acknowledgments

First, I am more than grateful to my committee, Marie Hoskins, Jennifer White, and Paul Bramadat, for their seemingly endless patience, encouragement, and thoughtful critique and challenge. To have had such intelligent, accomplished and kind people come together to support me and this work is more than I could have asked for, and to be able to come to know and admire them not only as scholars but as generous and warm people has been one of the greatest gifts of my graduate school experience. I am also indebted to the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria where I was a graduate fellow from 2019-2020. It is rare that such a diverse group of scholars and community members can come together to form a community grounded in respect, curiosity, and friendship, but this is the magic that is The Centre. To Joy Dixon, Hilary Mason, and Joshua Mason, I cannot begin to express my love for you and my gratitude for the undeserved good fortune of having you all in my life. And, most of all, for my husband, Daniel, whose love has been a part of this story from the beginning, and for my son, Beckett, who motivated me to deliver this thesis before I delivered him. Beckett, this is why you don't have a baby book.

For our shadow sisters, who showed us life could be different.

Chapter One: Introduction and Context

We were a rag-tag bunch; disciples by default. (Guest, 2004, p. 85)

1.1 Rationale

The topic of alternative religious movements (ARMs) is not often taken up in social services generally, or child and youth care (CYC) specifically. From a therapeutic perspective, little academic attention has been paid to the experiences of people involved with ARMs (Coates, 2010; Healy, 2011). Across disciplines, there is even less research into the experiences of children in these groups (Matthews & Salazar, 2014; Palmer & Hardman, 1999; Siskind, 2001). Despite these omissions, many helping professionals do indeed encounter those who were (or currently are) raised in ARMs. The highly publicized raids on controversial religious communities, accusations of child abuse and neglect in ARMs, and plethora of self-help books aimed at “recovering” from the experience are evidence of this (Hardman, 2008; Homer, 1999; Wright, 2011). From Jehovah’s Witnesses refusing blood transfusions for their children to teenage women fleeing polygamous marriages in Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints groups to allegations of substandard education and bizarre indoctrination in Scientology, the perceived threat to children’s wellbeing from these controversial religious groups is apparent. Although there is a significant amount of popular press material on ARM involvement, there is little scholarly work from the helping fields (this includes social workers, therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, clergy, outreach workers, and so on) that addresses wise practices for work with children living in these communities, or that offers insight into providing care for those who have left. Much of the academic literature is focused on those who join ARMs as adults. This has meant that the experiences and needs of those raised in ARMs are neglected. This thesis begins to address this gap in the literature.

In the last two decades, the popular fascination with ARMs has led to a surge of memoirs and television series about those who have been involved with and then exited controversial religious groups. A subset of this genre is concerned with those who were born and raised in these groups as opposed to having joined as adults. Some of these have gone on to be run-away bestsellers (e.g. Carolyn Jessop's *Escape*) or hit television series (e.g. *Unorthodox*). This thesis takes a selection of these memoirs as data and provides a narrative analysis of women's stories of growing up in and then leaving ARMs.

I became motivated to research women's experiences in ARMs because of my own childhood growing up in a controversial religious sect. I left the group in my early 20s and, at various points following this, found myself seeking therapy. The help I encountered from several well-qualified therapists, while well intentioned, was often grounded in stereotypes about "brainwashed cult members." This description did not feel like it fit me or my religious and spiritual experience. The helpers and print/online resources I found seemed to be working from flawed assumptions about alternative religions specifically and a lack of religious literacy more generally. When I began to explore the academic literature on ARMs and, in particular, therapeutic approaches to supporting those who have left, I discovered there was limited scholarly work on the topic and what was available was often presumptuous and patronizing. It was no wonder, then, that many of the helpers or resources I sought support from seemed unprepared or poorly informed on the topic.

This thesis addresses the question: How do women who have left ARMs narrate their experiences and how might their stories inform practice? This includes the practice of helpers in diverse fields such as social work, child and youth care, psychology, clinical counselling, and so on. To answer this, I have worked from a post-structural feminist and deconstructionist

perspective and conducted a reflexive, thematic, narrative analysis of four memoirs written by North American women who were raised in and then left ARMs (Braun & Clark, 2019; Riessman, 2008). It is my hope that the findings presented here will be able to provide a more robust grounding for helpers who encounter these “disciples by default” who have grown up in and then journeyed out of ARMs.

1.2 Positionality

I was raised in The Worldwide Church of God (WCG or simply Worldwide)¹, an alternative religious movement founded by Herbert W. Armstrong in the United States in the 1930s. The WCG has been variously called a sect, a dooms-day cult, a new religious movement, a high demand religion, a world-rejecting religion, and a scam. Despite this, and despite my exceedingly mixed feelings about the group and my time in it, I continue to recognize and acknowledge it as a foundational part of who I am. For better or worse, the WCG will always feel like my home. Beginning in the mid 1990s, the group went through radical doctrinal and cultural changes that moved it towards mainstream Evangelicalism. These changes were not well received by members and within a decade caused the dissolution of the church. This experience has had a profound impact on the deepest parts of my life and, necessarily, informs my work and, in particular, my theoretical orientation.

I have always found giving a brief summary of Worldwide and my experience with it to be difficult. In part, I sense that listeners or readers expect certain answers that I am not prepared or able to give and, as a result, they often find my reflections disappointing. Was the WCG good or bad? Was Herbert Armstrong genuine or a fraud? Answering, “I don’t know,” or “It’s

¹ The WCG was originally called the *Radio Church of God* because members “attended” church by listening to Armstrong preach over the radio. The name was changed to *Worldwide Church of God* in the 1968.

complicated,” or even, “I don’t really care anymore,” does not satisfy an audience or conversation partner. At a party, I once ended up talking with someone who happened to be a television news reporter and who began asking me about my upbringing. As the conversation went on, I could tell that he was disappointed that I was not providing more lurid or interesting details. At one point I laughed and asked what kinds of things he was hoping I would say. “The kinds of things that could go on T.V.!” he answered. What is the point of telling your “cult” story, after all, if it does not titillate your audience and increase your viewership? Nevertheless, and while it might not inspire a movie of the week, here is a short description of the WCG and my experience of growing up in it.

Herbert W. Armstrong was an advertising man living in Oregon and struggling to cope during the Great Depression when he came to believe that he alone held the key to understanding the Bible and its prophetic relevance for the modern day. As I was told, Armstrong’s wife, Loma, unnerved him when she began studying with a group of Sabbatarians and reported to her husband that nowhere did the Bible say that the Sabbath should be observed on Sunday. Certain that she was misinformed, Armstrong set out to read the Bible for himself in order to settle the matter. His studies convinced him that his wife was correct and, further, as Melton (1992) explains, “God exists; evolution is a false theory; the Bible is God’s inspired, infallible instruction book; the Saturday Sabbath is still binding today; the Jewish holy days and festivals are also still binding; death, not eternal punishment, awaits the unsaved; and eternal life is God’s Gift to believers” (p. 151). While Armstrong’s staunch opposition to evolution and view that the Bible is infallible were quite in-line with the American Christianity of his day, a number of unusual doctrines distinguished the WCG from mainline Christianity making it a notably

controversial group. These included a rejection of the Trinity, support of British-Israelism², observing the Saturday Sabbath, celebration of Jewish holy days and dietary laws, and opposition to mainstream Christian holidays (e.g. Christmas, Easter). Unlike many (perhaps most) Christian denominations, Armstrong also taught that it was not the fate of human beings to either be eternally rewarded in heaven or punished in hell. Upon death, every human would, for a time, simply cease to be (a belief called mortalism) until God raised them from this dormant state. Armstrong explained that humanity was on a fatal course and would eventually destroy itself through war and environmental disaster (a perspective I still find quite believable). In the end, God would intervene to prevent this complete destruction. At this point in the eschatological story, WCG members would be resurrected to rebuild the broken Earth alongside God. This Utopia, which we called The Kingdom of God or The World Tomorrow, would be the place where those who had never had the chance to hear the gospel (according to Armstrong) would be raised from the dead to live and learn alongside church members in a peaceful world free of war, disease, poverty and suffering of all kinds. Here, they would be given the opportunity to either accept or reject God. As opposed to being condemned to hell for all eternity, those who rejected God would be destroyed and permanently cease to exist (a belief called annihilationism). In addition to these unusual eschatological beliefs, the WCG viewed mainstream medicine (e.g. vaccinations, prescription medications) with suspicion. Voting and military participation were discouraged as was dating and marrying outside the church. Most importantly, write Jenkins and Thomas (2009), “Members of the WCG believed that they were the *only* true Christians called by

² This is the belief that, as Brackney (2012) states, “Great Britain is genetically, racially, and linguistically the descendant of the ancient Israelites” (p. 61). Armstrong was a major proponent of British-Israelism and expanded on the concept in his own fashion to include the United States and linking this to Biblical prophecy.

God and that other Christian followers were ‘pagan,’ ‘false prophets’ or simply misled (p.114). Armstrong’s mission to spread this gospel and to counter what he saw as the heresy and apostasy of mainstream Christianity was bolstered by his former success in advertising. Making good use of print media, radio, and eventually television, the WCG built a media empire that reached millions. Armstrong’s crowning achievements, however, were the three branches of the church-operated Ambassador College located in Pasadena, California; Big Sandy, Texas; and Bricket Wood, England. These (unaccredited) institutions offered religious education, moral guidance, and socialization opportunities to those in the WCG, many of whom, by the 70s and 80s, had been born and raised in the church.

Armstrong died in 1986 and was succeeded in his role as Pastor General by Joseph Tkach Sr. It is here that what may otherwise be the story of an odd and ephemeral religious group takes an unusual turn. In the decade following Armstrong’s death, Tkach Sr. began to undo many of the more controversial doctrines, easing restrictions on members and nudging the WCG towards American Evangelical Orthodoxy. This culminated in a now infamous (to those in the WCG at the time) sermon in 1994 where Tkach Sr. formally distanced himself and the WCG from Armstrong’s teachings. Barrett (2013) explains how in what, for many, was a sudden and devastating proclamation, Tkach Sr. “announced that the Worldwide Church of God had renounced all of its founder’s distinctive teachings and had become a straightforward Evangelical Christian church” (p. 4). Within a year of this announcement, Tkach Sr. died and was replaced by his son, Tkach Jr., who continued his father’s project of reforming the church.

The problem with this top-down attempt at reform was that many members disagreed with the changes and would not follow the Tkachs’ leadership. The result was a schism that led to the eventual dissolution of the WCG. Hundreds of splinter groups, each claiming to carry the

true legacy of Armstrong's teachings, were the result of what members began to call "The Changes." Those who followed the Tkach's leadership either remained in the WCG or moved to local Evangelical churches. Many who did not support the changes joined splinter groups or left to worship on their own at home. At the same time, a number of the non-supporters chose to remain in the WCG despite their disagreement. Still believing that the Worldwide Church of God was God's true church, they hoped that this challenging period would pass and the church would eventually right itself. But going back to its former ways was not the fate of the WCG.

Hemorrhaging members as well as funds, the church essentially dissolved. Currently, a small Evangelical church called Grace Communion International exists as a linear successor of the WCG but retains none of Armstrong's original teachings and goes to great lengths to distance itself from its founder and controversial history. I do not recognize it as the church that I was raised in. To say that such sweeping and sudden doctrinal changes towards mainstream orthodoxy is unusual would be an understatement. Indeed, there is no equivalent that I am aware of in modern religious history.

I was born in 1985 near Pasadena, California which, at the time, was the WCG's headquarters. My parents met and married at Ambassador College (Armstrong's unaccredited Bible college), and they continued to work for the church after graduating. I was an infant when Armstrong died. Shortly after this, my family moved to rural Montana where I and my four younger siblings were raised. I was nine years old when Tkach Sr. announced the move to Evangelicalism. I remember watching his sermon, which had been distributed to all the local congregations on VHS tape and played during a January Sabbath service, and seeing the adult members around me react with shock, confusion, even tears. My childhood was greatly impacted

by these doctrinal changes and the years of upheaval that followed. In retrospect, it feels like I was raised in a strange, sociological experiment.

As a child, of all the holidays I did not celebrate, Halloween was my favourite. Because Halloween comes directly to one's door, I ended up having a strange kind of semi-participation in the ritual of trick-or-treating. My mother's solution to managing this event was to turn off all the lights in the house, close the blinds, and have her children hide on the floor of the bedroom. Each time there was a knock at the door my heart would beat faster. I felt like a Hebrew child with the Angel of Death passing over. It was so dramatic and scary. I loved it. Other mainstream holidays were less enjoyable because they required a constant, improvised negotiation while at school. I feel my first foray into critical theological thinking was provoked by receiving a chocolate Easter bunny when I was around nine or ten. Is it always sinful to eat chocolate bunnies, I wondered, or is it only when they are produced and consumed at Easter time? If I were to save this bunny for some Tuesday in July, would the bunny and its eating become benign? In other words, are chocolate bunnies *essentially* sinful, or is this a socially constructed concept?

Negotiating holiday candy, however, was only an occasional frustration. My childhood in the WCG was, I feel, largely a positive experience. Indeed, my main source of stress was the reactions of others to my religious beliefs and practices. I was sent to public school but, at the same time, it was made very clear to me that my main source of identity was in the WCG. When I was with children who were not in the church (as we phrased it), I felt a sense of specialness and separateness that was at times inhibiting and at times empowering. I understood that there was something fundamentally different about me. For the most part, I do not recall this being distressing, at least, not when I was very young. It did take energy and effort, however, to maintain my social and spiritual distance from others.

As the changes in the WCG began to take hold and I moved towards adolescence, I became very aware that the church was in upheaval and that this was something I should pay attention to and have informed opinions on. I was a theologically obsessed adolescent. Even in grades five and six I remember pouring over church literature and my father's vast collection of religious books. It was also during this time that I became aware that I was not religious in the *right way*. Indeed, a number of children and their families in our mostly Evangelical rural community took it upon themselves to "save" me. This I *did* find distressing because I found the theology of my mainstream Christian peers to be terrifying. How could anyone worship a god who would send someone to hell for all eternity? Further, why would that god snatch people up to heaven in some sort of rapture and abandon the Earth that he created? Most especially, how could someone think that this god would send someone to hell simply because they had the misfortune of never having met a missionary and converting to their brand of Christianity? My list could go on but, suffice to say, I came to the speedy conclusion that I should keep well away from these Evangelicals and their dangerous and unusual beliefs.

My adolescence was tumultuous and unhappy. By the time I was fourteen I had become deeply disillusioned with the WCG. My parents were among those who remained in the church while adhering to Mr. Armstrong's original doctrines. The turmoil in the church caused a great deal of social, familial, and emotional strife and, combined with the expected adolescent boundary-pushing, this created a lot of tension and conflict. Much of this had to do with my teenage sexual exploration, which was strictly controlled. By this time, Ambassador college had been closed which left the question of what to do with me after high school. Certainly, I could not be sent to a secular college to be polluted with evolution, lesbianism, socialism, free-love, and abortion, so a compromise was made and I went to Trinity Western University, an

Evangelical university in British Columbia where, at least, some kind of moral standards would be upheld, even if the culture was not specifically ours. The selection of this particular school was largely engineered by me so I could be near a young man I was involved with at the time. Dan was also raised in Worldwide and he and I had met at one of our annual festivals, the Feast of Tabernacles.

Trinity Western was my first real experience of the wider world and Langley, BC seemed like a bustling metropolis compared to rural Montana. A deeply Evangelical university, many of my classmates had gone to private Christian high-schools and seemed at ease in the shared culture of contemporary Evangelicalism. Trinity Western is associated with the Evangelical Free Churches of America and is the largest Christian liberal arts university in Canada, with a mandate to not only educate its students but provide an immersive experience of “faith-based and faith affirming learning” (Trinity Western University, n.d.). Socially and theologically, this did not work for me. Every Friday Dan would pick me up and take me to his family’s home, in part so we could attend Sabbath services. I enjoyed the weekend escape and found myself devastated to return to my dorm on Sunday evening. In the end, I would spend only one year at Trinity Western. After I dropped out of university, Dan and I married after a two-month engagement and moved to Toronto the day after the wedding. Though I do not think that either of us consciously thought that we were moving to put distance between ourselves and the WCG, the idea that we might be somewhere where we knew no one and had no church connections was certainly tantalizing and liberating. After our move, with no discussion, we simply had no more contact with the WCG.

I consider this move to Toronto to be my exit from the Worldwide Church of God but certainly not my exit from religion. For some time, I felt sure that there must be some church that

was “true” and if only I could study the Bible hard enough, I would figure out which one it was. My anxiety over not being able to find the theological and philosophical answers I was looking for was devastating and, in some ways, humiliating. I felt ashamed; like I was failing some sort of test. I began to obsessively ruminate over what I thought were my sins and the fact that I could not figure out what church I needed to join or what I needed to do to be saved. In addition, I was 19 and married, had recently moved to one of the largest cities in North America after only ever experiencing rural life, and, once it became clear that I had fallen away from the WCG (or, what remained of it) had lost my family and social supports. I ended up attending community college to study child and youth care. Childcare, I felt, was something I knew how to do, and, at that point, it would not have occurred to me to pursue much else. Socially, however, I felt out of sync with my peers, none of whom needed to go home at the end of the school day to make dinner for their husbands and who seemed blithely untroubled by the state of their souls.

During this time, I ended up joining the Anglican Church because of a friend. Since the collapse of the WCG I had no ritual or routine in my life and I missed it. There was no Sabbath, no holiness, no sacred space or time. Anglicanism did not feel like my home, but it was a nice place to visit. I liked the Anglicans. As far as I could tell, they could not agree on anything, yet they showed up week to week and sat in the pew next to one another and made themselves a community. By the time I encountered the Anglican Church, they also had no pretense about being the one, true church or having all the answers. I found this comforting. While it has now been many years since I left the Anglican church, I still consider it to have been a wonderful, safe, healing experience that I will treasure.

In the end, I came to realize, with a lot of sorrow, that I probably did not believe in the god of the Bible, or any other god, and so I left church life all together. Because I was working

for an Anglican parish at the time, this also meant losing my employment. I felt an obligation to keep my loss of faith and belief private so as not to distress others in the congregation, and I quietly disentangled myself from church life without alerting anyone to my personal crisis. I had lost the religious tradition of my childhood and now, despite my great efforts, I had lost my belief in god too. My lack of belief isolated me from the kinds of communities I felt were so important. I hated the label atheist and felt it did not capture what I truly felt or believed. But if you are not a believer, then, as far as I understood, atheist was the only category left for you. Either you had faith, or you did not. Either you were in or you were out.

Through all this I read and wrote and thought. I felt with Nietzsche (2012) that the death of God in my life left me “straying through an infinite nothing.” I attempted to cling to the hope offered by Dostoyevsky (1990) that if I loved harder and cared more that my faith would be restored, “... if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will ever be able to enter your soul” (p. 56). Perhaps my lack of faith was the result of not trying hard enough. I felt like I was always sailing and never going ashore. Always asking questions but never finding answers.

It was during this time that I began to explore counselling and, over a period of a decade, visited a number of different therapists. While I certainly felt comforted by the relationships I developed with these caring professionals, I also felt disappointed. I was told it would not be possible to have a healthy relationship with my family because they were under the control of a “cult.” Assumptions were made about how I felt and how I understood my experience. At times, I felt I was not truly being listened to because the therapist already had a predetermined understanding of the “cult” experience and how I should be navigating it. It was supposed that the Worldwide was bad, I was a victim, that I had escaped a terrible fate by leaving, and if I

could only have the right perspective I would see that life was much better now. I was “free.” In therapy, I was often left feeling like I was trying to wear a jacket that did not quite fit but I could not figure out why.

A turning point came when I learned that a sociologist, David V. Barrett, (2013) wrote a book about the Worldwide Church of God. I felt privileged that a stranger thought our weird little church was important enough to take seriously. He did not mock us, criticize our theology, or tell us we were brainwashed and in need of rescuing. He neither romanticized nor demonized. I looked through the pages of the book and saw photos of people I knew, the place where my parents were married, and read the story of my family through the strange and oddly liberating lens of sociology. Being able to look at my experience through the lens of research was incredibly gratifying and, I found, better than any therapy I had tried. I began to be radically curious about the WCG. Being able to situate the group in its historical and cultural milieu helped me make sense of it as well as Mr. Armstrong and my parents. I started to understand that much of what I experienced as harmful, even abusive, was not unique to the WCG, indeed, not even unique to religion, but was the product of widespread patriarchal systems of oppression. As my understanding broadened, I felt like I could be selective about which parts of my experience I wanted to continue to value and which parts I found harmful and could let go of. I no longer needed to understand the experience through the pathologizing perspective of “cult mind control.” I allowed myself to have contradictory feelings about the experience; to be angry about some things and nostalgic about others. I also felt less inclined to allow others to dictate my experience to me. I would decide if I had been in a “cult,” what I found harmful and what I found valuable. I would similarly decide how I would relate my experiences to others, how much, to whom, and under what circumstances. In the end, I decided that my experiences were more than

just something to be ashamed of and that my background afforded me an interesting and valuable perspective on life that I could draw on and appreciate. I returned to university because I wanted to be a researcher and perhaps offer to others like me the kind of healing and sense-making that I found in this new perspective on the ARM experience.

1.3 Theoretical Orientation

Growing up in a religious tradition that dies during your lifetime is an unsettling gift. It pulls the ontological rug out from beneath you. It is like stumbling behind the stage and seeing all the rigging and wiring. This experience places me in an unsettling position relative to authority of all sorts, and I have a keenly developed hermeneutic of suspicion. (I once heard a rabbi describe “hermeneutic of suspicion” as, “What kind of bullshit is this S.O.B trying to feed me?” This definition has always stayed with me.) Because I have seen behind a metaphorical curtain, albeit a very particular one, I often perceive those in authority as both very good people and, at the same time, “very bad wizards” (LeRoy & Fleming, 1939). In my experience, all emperors have no clothes.

Despite, or perhaps because of, learning at a young age that all-the-world is a stage and the men and women running the show are merely naked emperors, I find myself fascinated by this rigging and wiring. With Foucault, I want to not only see how things are made, but how they might be unmade, or made differently (Raulet, 1983). “To question the ways in which we think, live and relate to other people and to ourselves in order to show how that-which-is could be otherwise” (Oksala, 2008, p. 10). It follows that the theoretical perspective from which I orient myself in this research is deconstructionism and post-structural feminism.

Deconstruction

In this thesis, I am most interested in deconstruction as it is used by the philosopher and theologian John D. Caputo. Caputo, a friend and colleague of Jacques Derrida, is perhaps best known for bringing the deconstructionist way of understanding into the theological realm. Caputo (1997) suggests that a deconstructive reading is about producing what is between the author's conscious intention and "what is going on in the text, as it were, behind her [the author's] back" (78). A deconstructive reading, then, has two parts. The first is a more classical exegesis; a coming to terms with what the author says and intends through the text. The second part, Caputo (1997) explains, moves beyond a straight-forward reading to explore what the author "omits, forgets, excludes, expels, marginalizes, dismisses, ignores, scorns, slights, takes too lightly, waves off, is just not serious enough about!" (p. 79). Because I am using life writing as data, a genre that comes with its own conventions and expectations, and because popular conceptions of the ARM experience are so engrained in the public's imagination, this deconstructive approach is particularly useful. On the one hand, these memoirs are works of popular literature which means they are often concerned with affirming popular discourse. These are stories written for mass consumption and with the hope of selling a lot of books. To put it simply, these appear to be tales of women oppressed by "weird" religions who go on to escape and find freedom in secular, mainstream society. But a deconstructive reading is an invitation to go beyond this surface level, beyond what a publisher might put on a dustjacket, even beyond what the author understands herself to be doing. It is an invitation to step into paradox and defy mundane categorization. This can be seen by intentionally reading beyond the binaries of religion/"cult", agentic/brainwashed and freedom/oppression that pervade stories of ARM involvement.

Deconstructionism may be seen as a reaction to modernity and, in particular, the modern project of binary categorization: Private and public, secular and religious, male and female, sane and insane, theism and atheism, rational and emotional, and so on. For modernity, there was a clear preference for the scientific, rational, atheistic, and secular (Caputo, 2016). The hope from the modern perspective was that if people were going to be religious or engage in any manner of irrational beliefs and behaviours, they must at least confine this to the privacy of their home or inner life and not, say, bring it into the workplace or into politics.

Of course, we are not “moderns,” nor did the promises of modernity take hold in the ways that its founders had hoped. As Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, (2013) put it, “The Enlightenment project of combining freedom and happiness through progress based on science and technology has more and more lost credibility” (p. 20). “Science” and “reason” did not supplant religion and superstition as had been predicted, and the promise of an increasingly secular, rational society has largely gone unfulfilled. The rise of the “spiritual but not religious” category, particularly among millennials who are happy to be labeled as spiritual but are careful to distance themselves from the category of religion, is just one way this is evidenced (Watts, 2018). The rise of spirituality may be seen as a response to what is often perceived to be religion’s inherently authoritarian, patriarchal, regimented, and colonial underpinnings. This can be seen in Orsi’s (2005) suggestion that spirituality is popularly understood to be the opposite of “bad religion.”

This is not to say that the Euro-Western world has simply closed the book on modernity and that the effects – good and bad – are not still felt. To draw an example from Foucault (1988), thanks to modernity we can recognize, categorize, and put “madness” in its proper place. Once you know who is mad, you can tuck them away in an institution, or subdue them with

medication. Like a grand house where everything is in order, the shabby or unfashionable furniture, once we have the categories to recognize it as such, can be locked in the attic. These grand and orderly houses, however, are also the well-known sites of a different kind of story. There are monsters in the attic of modernity.

How does one become a monster? One way is to be in between and defy these binary categories. Derrida suggests that monsters are a hybrid species for whom we, as yet, have no name or category (Derrida, 1995). For example, transgender and gender queer people, very aware that they are “queerly between” have taken up the notion of “monster” as a tool of resistance (Nordmarken, 2013, p. 38). Nordmarken (2013) elaborates, “Their failure to attribute a gender category to me makes my ambiguous gender performance a form of resistance. I take power in their confusion. I feel a rush of heat and euphoria in this moment of freedom—as I monster, gender-fuck and gender-terrorize” (p. 40). Thus, one way to be a monster is to be a hybrid; to move beyond or break out of the boundaries of binary categorization.

ARMs, religious bastards and abominations, are monsters in this way. They push boundaries and defy categorizations. They are hybrids of things we would like to keep distinct. For example: Science and religion in Scientology; East and West in the Rajneeshi movement; women and power in Theosophy. They deconstruct the norms and institutions that underwrite “civilized society.” They rewrite histories and futures in unacceptable, heretical ways. This is one way ARMs get themselves into so much trouble. Goodwin (2018) expands on the ways some ARMs may do this with gender:

Throughout American history, new religions have pushed gender boundaries. Many facilitated women’s leadership and authority, as seen in figures like the Shakers’ Mother Ann Lee or Christian Science’s Mary Baker Eddy. New religious movements can prompt

reconsideration of divine gender, as with contemporary Goddess worship. They can challenge traditional gender roles, identities, and performances, as evidenced in Spiritualism and many forms of Neopaganism. New religions are a space in which Americans negotiate gender and power” (p. 17).

In a sense, the memoirs taken up here are the stories of women who are religious “monsters” who then become “normal.” By the magic of rational thinking and education they are transformed from Creatures of the Categorically In-Between to be categorized into the binary of either acceptably religious or acceptably secular. This is the story many readers will expect to encounter in these memoirs and the story that, I would argue, a deconstructive reading invites us to look beyond.

Post-Structuralist Feminism

I was married in a Worldwide Church of God service. Three days before the wedding the minister sent the vows we would be using. In looking them over, I noticed that the man and woman made different promises. The man vowed to protect and provide while the woman vowed to honour and obey (this, of course, is not unique to the WCG). I had a pang of concern when I considered these vows and I felt I could not promise to obey. Though my first thought was to simply say the words even though I had no intention to follow through, something about that idea troubled me. Politely, I asked if there were some vows that could be used where the man and the woman made the same promises. I was told that these were the vows that must be used, or the minister would not conduct the service. I felt pressure from my family to stop making such a fuss and to just recite the words regardless of how I felt. Yet I could not shake the feeling that in speaking this I was somehow creating or joining into a reality that I did not want to be a part of. Perhaps the words were only symbolic, but symbols, as the theologian Tillich (2012)

explains, participate in the reality to which they point. I found myself faced with participating in a reality that I was not comfortable with; that I did not want to enact or create. I told the minister I would not agree, and he declined to perform the service. Somehow, the day before the wedding, I found a more progressive WCG minister to take his place.

While I would not, in any way, have described myself as a feminist at that point in my life, this was a moment when, perhaps for the first time, I became aware of what Kerber (1991) calls the “hidden power of language in the shaping and construction of social relations” (p. 91). Or, as Davies (1991) puts it, “We can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourse” (p. 42). In other words, and in the limited way that I was able at the time, I somehow became aware of limitations of my available discourses and wondered if there might be some other way. Post-structuralist feminism, as informed by writers and thinkers like Joan Scott, bell hooks, Bronwyn Davies, and Sarah Ahmed, feels like a natural home for my theoretical orientation. This is a home I have come to occupy after a long journey that began, or, at least, began in my own awareness and somewhat paradoxically, at my wedding.

As a lens, post-structuralist feminism provides a way to unsettle and disrupt stagnant discourses, particularly around gender. For the study of ARMs and, in particular, women’s stories of ARMs, post-structuralist feminism invites me to disrupt the tired narrative of “oppressed women escaping from cults.” From this position, rather than seek to reveal universal truths about gender or ARM experiences, I am more concerned with revealing the way particular narratives are given preference and legitimized. In doing so, I am curious to see how those narratives might be challenged and perhaps changed, particularly in a therapeutic context. bell hooks (1984) writes, “Being oppressed means the absence of choices,” (p. 5). I experienced this absence of choice as a limitation on how my story might be told both while in the WCG and after

leaving. In my experience of sharing my story with others, either to friends and acquaintances or to a therapist, I have had a keen sense that I am expected to tell my story of being a woman raised in an ARM within specific, narrow confines. That there is a “right” way to unfold the narrative and a “right” way to feel about the experience. As Laird (1989) writes, “There are both obvious and subtle differences in the power individuals and particular interest groups possess to ensure that particular narratives will prevail in family, group, and national life. Not all stories are equal” (p. 430). Guided by post-structuralist feminism, I am interested in seeing how a fresh reading of these memoirs challenges stereotypes and expectations.

To do this, I think with common features in post-structuralist feminist thought as well as deconstructionism.

(1) Deconstruction, as Scott (1988) writes, entails, “analyzing the operations of difference in texts, the ways in which meanings are made to work” (Scott, 1988, p. 37). Scott (1988) suggests this is done through the reversal and displacement of binary opposites. These binaries (e.g. doubt/faith, secular/religious, free/oppressed) create the illusion that they are natural rather than constructed oppositions. A deconstructive reading is mindful of the assumed hierarchy in these binaries and the way meaning is constructed and, thus, might be deconstructed through destabilizing them.

(2) I understand agency as a product of one’s subject position and dependent on available discourses (Davies, 1991). The concept of agency is particularly important here as it is assumed that those raised in ARMs, like other women often portrayed as oppressed, have little access to agency. With Ahmed (2020), I look with caution on moments where the women in these memoirs *appear* passive or submissive, and intentionally look for the myriad ways that women strategically resist and respond to violence and oppression.

(3) Writing of post-structural feminism, Davies (1991) states, “Stories are the means by which events are interpreted, made tellable, or even liveable.” This understanding similarly grounds a narrative approach to therapeutic work. We create and give meaning to our lives through the many interlocking and interwoven stories about who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going (Morgan, 2000). These stories do not contain meaning in and of themselves; rather, meaning is a malleable and re-constructable feature of story that is continually being socially and relationally co-constructed.

(4) Dominant discourses are frequently experienced as limiting. As Kathleen S.G. Skott-Myhre (2012) writes, “Problems develop when people internalize conversations that restrain them to a narrow description of self. These stories are experienced as oppressive because they limit the perception of available choices” (p. 184). As per narrative therapy, Derrida’s deconstruction is used to identify and externalize these dominant, problem saturated narratives while highlighting gaps, contradictions, exceptions, and ambiguities in tired, limiting stories (Besley, 2002). These exceptions to the dominant narrative can create space for individuals to “construct alternatives that re-author, re-construct or re-narrativise their lives (Besley, 2002, p. 133). Narrative therapy, deconstructionism, and post-structuralist feminism are aligned here in looking to, as Davies and Gannon (2005) write, “disrupt that which is taken as stable/unquestionable truth” thereby creating new possibilities (p. 320).

(5) The researcher is not separate from the data (Davies & Gannon, 2005). It is not my intention here to present an unbiased analysis of women’s experiences in ARMs. I acknowledge that I bring an insider’s perspective to the topic. In sharing some of my story and being explicit in outlining how this informs my theoretical orientation, I am hoping to be transparent in revealing the situated knowledges I bring to this work (Haraway, 1988). To follow Haraway

(1988) further, my gaze does not appear out of nowhere. Rather than pretend I bring an objective eye, I choose to make my subjectivity explicit.

I see research as a paradoxical enterprise. It involves continually trying to see from the vantage point of where we are not, which is a self-contradiction because, of course, by the time we get there, we are already there. As Lather (2006) writes, research is a refracted process of “persistent effort and deferred fulfillment” (p. 42). To me, this sometimes feels like rolling the mythical boulder perpetually up the hill. Saldaña (2011) states, “One approach to understanding the social world is to discern its patterns and to construct human meanings that seem to capture life’s essences and essentials” (p. 89). But what is the point of looking for patterns or even constructing meaning if it is – well – just a construction? If we are, as Caputo (2018) says “always already going back to where we already are” (p. 309).

I do not have a satisfying answer to this, but I will offer a metaphor that brings meaning to my own particular work. People who talk with me about their journeys with religious belief and belonging – especially if they have gone through what they understand to be a religious and spiritual loss – often describe the experience by using the metaphor of a shelf breaking. One after another, doubts are placed on the shelf until it collapses. For me, research is the art of constructing a kind of shelf where stories can sit beside one another – together but still maintaining their distinction. One of the gifts of good research is that it can relieve us from the burden of thinking ours is the only story. It can make us feel less alone. It can also open to us the possibility that our own stories might be told in a different way or examined through a new lens. Davies (1991) writes: “To be a feminist, or a feminist theorist is itself to engage in the very act of choosing to speak, of discovering the possibility of authority, of using that speaking, that authority, to bring about fundamental changes in *the possible ways of being that are available to*

oneself and others” (p. 52, emphasis mine). Especially for those who feel they are lost after a religious or spiritual transition, I hope my research – my shelf - can be a finding place.

1.4 Thesis Organization

This thesis is organized into five chapters. This chapter has provided a rationale for the project, described my positionality, outlined some of my story, and, stemming from this, the theoretical orientation that guides my research. The second chapter contains an overview of key terms and a literature review. The third chapter describes the methodology including methods and framework of analysis. The fourth chapter presents the findings alongside the analysis. The fifth chapter offers a discussion and brief conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Clarifying Terms

In the 1930s, Troeltsch (1931) developed a three-fold typology of Christianity: church religion, sect religion, and mysticism. For Troeltsch, mysticism is the personal, inward experience of divinity and, while mystical experiences might prompt the formation of groups, they are largely informal and spontaneous (Campbell, 1977; Nelson, 1968). Further developing the category of mysticism, sociologists Becker (von Wiese & Becker, 1932) and, later, Yinger (1957) employed the term “cult” to highlight the loosely-structured organizational form of religious groups that were most often novel, individually focussed and centered around mystical, ecstatic experiences (Campbell, 1977; Nelson, 1968). In the decades that followed, the term was used in scholarly writing to describe religious groups viewed as deviant, though the precise meaning and usefulness of the term has often been debated (Campbell, 1977; Perrin, 2001; Richardson, 1993). By the 1970s, “cult” found its way into popular discourse to describe groups seen as manipulative, aggressive, authoritarian, and often new, or, at least, unfamiliar to many in North America (Robbins & Anthony, 1982). Reflecting on this shift, Richardson (1993) writes, “The term has become a ‘social weapon’ to use against groups which are not viewed with favor” (p. 352). As the esteemed sociologist Eileen Barker (2009) put it, “In popular parlance, a cult is a religion I don’t like” (para. 1). Because the term had become an emotionally charged pejorative, losing almost all connection with its former, technical origins, the phrase “new religious movement” (NRM) began to be replace the word “cult” in most scholarly discourse. Currently, “cult” is used in academic discourse by a minority of scholars who continue to view certain religious groups or organizational structures as inherently harmful (e.g. The International Cultic Studies Association) (Barker, 2017).

While adopting the phrase “new religious movements” has been an important step in establishing a less pejorative way to speak of certain minority religions, I believe it neglects a key feature uniting these groups, many of which are not new (or, at least, do not understand themselves to be new) (Cowan, 2016). “New” also raises the question of “new to whom?” Many groups labelled as “new” are merely receiving attention for the first time within a Euro-Western context. NRM also gives the impression that these groups have appeared seemingly from nowhere. For these reasons, and although NRM is the more established scholarly term, I use the phrase “alternative religious movements” (ARM). Akin to “alternative medicine,” which does not refer to a specific modality but to diverse forms of healing outside the dominant health care of a particular society, ARMs are similarly understood to be outside the religious mainstream of a particular society (Gallagher & Ashcroft, 2006; Ross, 2020, Urban, 2015). “Alternative” situates a religious group within a particular geography and culture and positions it as outside the popular mainstream of that culture. Thus, when I use the phrase “alternative religious movement” in my work, it should always and only be understood to mean religious groups that are popularly perceived to be outside the mainstream in the contemporary, Euro-Western culture that this thesis is concerned with.

ARM, then, is not a descriptor of the specific features of a group, but a marker of its status as an “other” religion. While some religions may be a minority in a particular area (say, Islam in Saskatoon), ARMs are a minority everywhere. ARMs are not set apart by their beliefs or organizational structure, per se, but by the public perception of being “weird”, even threatening (Melton, 2004; Melton, 2007; Palmer & Hardman, 1999; Richardson, 1993). This is evidenced by the fact that groups that fall under the umbrella term ARM have virtually nothing in common aside from this perception. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons and Fundamentalist Mormons,

followers of Sri Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, those who practice Wicca, The Branch Davidians of Waco Texas, the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Lev Tahor, Scientology, and the Family International/Children of God, (to name only a few) have all, at some point, been understood to be (or, perhaps accused of being) “cults” (Berger, 1999; Cragun, Nielsen & Clingenpeel, 2011; Frisk, 2018a; “Lev Tahor,” 2004; Lewis & Melton, 1994; Puttick, 1999; Tabor & Gallagher, 1995).

Certainly, this thesis will not settle the debate around terminology and there is no perfect solution. However, by using ARM I am choosing to highlight the socially constructed and shifting nature of the category. This terminology fits well with the understanding offered by the authors of these memoirs. Each author appears to understand that their religious movement is alternative and (often) unpopular, while they do not dwell on the group’s relative newness. Each of these authors also positions her religious group alongside other well-known ARMs, specifically mentioning Waco, Jonestown, International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and so on. Aside from being under the same ARM umbrella, the authors’ groups have little in common with these other religious movements, however each author takes time to explain how her group was perceived to be somehow related to these other ARMs.

Whether a scholar uses the word “cult” or NRM/ARM in their work is an indicator of their view on key, divisive issues. The word chosen positions a writer within a particular camp in what has been a long-running and heated debate about the inherent harmfulness of certain groups and whether or not academics should function as activists who work to warn people of these purported dangers (Gallagher, 2017; Introvigne, 2014a; Palmer, 2001; Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). The language used around these religious groups is important beyond academe. Wessinger (1999) writes, “Today *cult* is a put-down, an insult conveying that a group is despised

by the social mainstream. *Cult* has become a word that expresses prejudice against a religious group” (p. 4). When choosing how to use language, I believe I have an obligation to be mindful of how that language may be felt and received by the people it is being applied to. In using ARM, I am not attempting to make a judgment about the value and virtue of specific religious groups. Rather, by refraining from pejorative language, I choose to extend the same respect to ARMs that I would to any other group.

It is useful to make a distinction between what is spiritual and what is religious. One might be deeply spiritual without also claiming that they belong to a particular religious tradition³. Similarly, one might engage in religious practice without necessarily describing themselves as spiritual. Religion and spirituality represent distinct articles in The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which enshrines the freedom of children to practice their religion (Article 30), and separately promotes a child’s spiritual well-being (Articles 17, 23, 27, 32). Scott (2003) writes of children’s spirituality as a domain of development understood separately from their religious, moral, and cultural lives. As can be seen in the UNCRC, spirituality is now often promoted as a kind of protective factor in children’s lives and a way of connecting to deeper meaning and purpose. Certainly, there are no universally accepted definitions of religion and spirituality. However, as Tweed (2006) states, scholars have a “role specific obligation” (p. 29) to work towards definitions. Tweed (2006) suggests that religions may be seen as “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and supra-human forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (p. 54). To this definition of religion, I would add the element of institutionalization. Unlike

³ As suggested by Wilkins-Laflamme (2018), spirituality may be understood as “a profound and usually positive experience that helps individuals find their authentic self, as well as connects them to a mysterious, universal, and overarching reality” (p. 17).

spirituality, religions are organizations, and one may be in or out of them. Admittedly, Tweed's attempt at a definition of religion is not immediately transparent. However, it is useful to draw on his notion of homes and boundaries. Central to my work is the idea of a religious community as a kind of home, and what happens when one "moves out."

2.2 Alternative Religious Movements in North America

For as long as there has been religion there have been religious deviants; those who occupy the fringes of religious legitimacy; the mystics, the heretics, the heathens and even the prophets. Similarly, there are religious groups that are viewed with suspicion; those who fall outside the bounds of inclusion. This may be because they are new or revolutionary, or because they are seen as socially and theologically transgressive. With this, there comes the sense that these religious movements are illegitimate; they have yet to establish themselves within the canon of "acceptable" religions (Cragun, et al., 2011; Melton, 2007; Saliba, 2003). From time to time, people will tell me something along the lines of, "At heart, all religions are really about loving your neighbor and becoming a better person." To which I will sometimes reply, "Yes, like Scientology." Most will quickly jump in to clarify that they are not speaking of something like Scientology, which is not a "real" religion. Scientology, like other ARMs, is not only different, it is, as Rochford (2007) writes, "unacceptably different" (p. 164). Perennialism, the understanding that all religions share a core truth, does not apply to ARMs (Draper, 2020). It is these kinds of "illegitimate" religions that I am most interested in.

While often associated with the North American counterculture of the 1960s and 70s, ARMs are not limited to the 20th century. ARMs have been active throughout the history of the Euro-Western world, comprising groups that are both innovative as well as renovative (Anthony & Robbins, 2008; Cowan, 2016; Finke & Stark, 1992). Some, like Heaven's Gate or Raëlism

(both UFO groups) appear completely novel. Others, like my own Worldwide Church of God, are largely radical renovations of a tradition. The Christian counter-cult movement has been quick to vilify groups with more historical standing - like the Jehovah's Witnesses who originated in the 1870s, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints who originated in the 1850s, and do so primarily over doctrinal differences (Barker, 1986; Braden, 1949; Cowan, 2003; Martin, 2003; Saliba, 2003). Despite having little in common besides being unpopular, both the novel religions of the 20th and 21st centuries and the more historical but theologically divergent Christian groups are thrown together under the umbrella-term ARM. Beginning in the mid 20th century, those groups understood to be controversial, minority religions also shared the common experience of being subject to accusations of what came to be popularly known as "brainwashing." The brainwashing approach to how ARM members are recruited and/or retained (as in the case of those born into such groups) has become foundational to informing both therapeutic and social service perspectives and is taken up more fully in the following section (2.3) on helping professionals and ARMs.

In the wake of WWII, the Euro-Western world became attuned to the ways that groups led by seemingly charismatic figures could inspire acts of unspeakable evil (Bromley, 2007; Prophet, 2016). The concept of brainwashing, mind-control, undue influence, coercive persuasion, or thought reform soon followed as a way of explaining how seemingly "rational", "ordinary" people might get swept up in groupthink or manipulated by authority (Anthony & Robbins, 2008; Enroth, 1977; Levine, 1984; Richardson & Introvigne, 2007)⁴. While formulations and definitions of brainwashing are varied, they share a common understanding, as

⁴ Brainwashing, mind-control, undue influence, coercive persuasion, and thought reform are used somewhat interchangeably in the literature and in my own work.

Anthony (2001) states, that “worldviews can be transformed to their polar opposites through techniques that create disorientation and hypersuggestibility followed by intensive indoctrination,” (p. 219). Between the 1940s and 70s, the Central Intelligence Agency in the United States put considerable effort into developing brainwashing into a tool that might be useful for military purposes, though with no success (Anthony, 2001). With time, concern about groupthink and involuntary worldview changes turned to new and troublesome religious movements (Anthony, 2001). Discussion of ARMs, brainwashing, and charismatic leadership have been inextricably intertwined, and ARMs are often seen as being led by manipulative, charismatic figures who use deceit and perhaps mind-control to lure unsuspecting victims into spiritual snares, usually for personal and financial gain (Bromley, 2014; Rochford, 2007; Van Twist, 2015).

The 1960s and 70s saw the rise of the counter-culture movement in North America, when “freaks,” “hippies,” and “drop-outs” rejected the prescribed trajectory of modern life. As young people started to drop out of “society” and join ARMs, these fringe movements and their followers became sites of social and political danger and not merely theological concern, instigating a moral panic around “dangerous cults” (Best, 1990; Gallagher, 2017; Richardson & Introvigne, 2007; Roof, 1999). Scholarly interest in ARMs began to flourish and much of the research centred on how people came to join/convert, as well as on particular groups that had risen to public notoriety (Cowan, 2016; Lewis & Tøllefsen, 2016). During this time, events like those of Jonestown solidified the dangers of ARMs in the public consciousness (Dawson, 2007; Introvigne, 2014). Over 900 people, including over 300 children, died in a mass suicide at the behest of their religious leader, Jim Jones, in what would be the largest loss of American civilian life until September 11, 2001 (Scheeres, 2011).

During the 1980s and 90s, the young people who joined ARMs in the 60s and 70s grew up and began having children of their own. At the same time, a handful of the more historic but theologically unusual religions continued to solidify and established an uneasy niche presence in the Euro-Western religious landscape. During this period, North America experienced a moral panic over the safety of children more generally, a turn of events that introduced new concerns about ARMs (Best, 1990; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Jenkins, 1998; Lancy, 2015; Victor, 1998). What had once been fear over the wellbeing of those who joined ARMs became fear over the children who had been born into them (Åckerbäck, 2018; Hardman, 2008; Richardson, 1999; Rochford, 2007; Schreinert & Richardson, 2011). This gave rise to what has become known as the “Satanic Panic.” As Dawson (2017) explains, conspiracy theories arose that “every year tens of thousands of children are kidnapped or purposefully bred for abuse or sacrifice by an organized and international network of Satanist” (p. 258). While no evidence of these crimes ever surfaced, fear over Satanic groups flourished in a social environment that was already gravely concerned about HIV/AIDs, sexual abuse, stranger abduction and other harms that might befall children (Dawson, 2017; Lippert, 1990; Lowney, 1995; Zgoba, 2004). Today, the concern that some religious groups and religious practices or teachings might be harmful to children now extends beyond ARMs, particularly given the highly publicized sexual abuse claims in the Catholic church (Bottoms, et al., 2015; Capps, 1992; Oakley et al., 2017). Those who were born into ARMs in the 80s and 90s are now old enough to tell their stories, and those who had harmful experiences find a ready audience across platforms; from Netflix specials, to magazine articles, to podcast interviews. While fear of brainwashing in ARMs continues and regularly surfaces in the media, much public and state attention about the danger of ARMs now focuses on the wellbeing of those raised in these groups.

While there has been an overall scholarly shift away from viewing all ARMs as predatory and harmful groups, this has not resulted in a shift in public opinion or in the media (Beckford, 2012; Neal, 2011; Olson, 2006; Richardson & Introvigne, 2007; Ruskell & Lewis, 2017; Urban, 2015). In journalism and popular media, there is a tendency to paint all ARMs with a similar brush, assuming they share the stereotypical features of communal living, self-serving and disingenuous leaders, and “brainwashed” followers (Diffrient, 2010; Goodwin, 2018; Hill et al, 2001; Lilliston & Shepherd, 2012; Wright, 1997). By contrast, a quite different set of features are understood by scholars to be particularly common among ARMs. A significant commonality is their development on the social margins; understanding themselves to be different, they actively challenge and critique mainstream society and religion (Clark, 2017; Dawson, 2007; Frisk, Nilsson & Åckerbäck, 2018). Viewing themselves as revolutionary, ARMs tend to defy conventions and stand out from the norm (Dawson, 2007). It has been suggested that ARMs often develop during unsettling times (Roof, 1993; Rochford, 2007). Without the structured trappings of more established religions, they are often highly innovative, able to adapt to meet quickly changing needs during social upheaval (Stalker, 2007). ARMs that are also new, in particular, may be led by gifted leaders who have the ability to command loyalty through their exceptional religious and spiritual abilities (Rochford, 2007; Stalker, 2007). Unlike the popular conceptions, these features in and of themselves are not inherently harmful or troubling. Many are characteristic of young organizations. Still, the need to distinguish themselves and carve out a niche in the broader religious market and the revolutionary sense that often accompanies these groups frequently places them in an uneasy relationship with more established religious traditions and broader society.

2.3 Helping Professionals and Alternative Religious Movements

This section considers literature relating to ARMs from a therapeutic perspective as well as from a child welfare perspective. While these two categories are distinct, they often rely on similar, underlying assumptions about the nature of ARMs and the experiences of current or former members. In particular, they both generally advocate for the theory of brainwashing as a model to explain ARM involvement (that is, how people come to join and how people are encouraged to remain), and they assume that all ARMs are harmful, especially to women and children. Nilsson (2016) writes:

The difference in perspective between scholars of religion and sociologists on the one hand, and scholars from the psychological field including psychologists, social workers, and therapists on the other, is not uncommon. Such polarization is, indeed, more the rule than the exception (p. 254).

At times, the line between child welfare practice and private, clinical practice has blurred when those who provide specialized counselling for people in/leaving ARMs become involved in state-organized child protection interventions. In part, this is due to advocacy by the anti-cult movement (ACM) and the counter-cult movement (CCM).

The ACM is a loose collection of concerned citizens, family members, former members, therapeutic professionals, and scholars who organize in opposition to ARMs they deem harmful and are united by their acceptance of brainwashing as a means to explain ARM involvement (Barker, 1986; Healy, 2011; Kaplan, 1993; Shupe, 2016). Arising in the 1960s and 70s in response to growing concern about ARMs, the ACM is secular in nature and purports to be interested in, as Introvigne (1995) phrases it, the “deeds, not creeds” (p. 34) they understand to be dangers to individual ARM members and to broader society. The CCM, conversely, is a loose collection of explicitly Christian advocates, evangelists and para-church organizations who are

concerned primarily with the theological deviance of ARMs (Melton, 2006; Miller, 2017). Cowan (2003) writes, “The Christian countercult is that branch of evangelical Protestantism most concerned about the growth of religious pluralism and with the advent of new and often controversial religious movements” (p. 4). The CCM has its origins in the late 19th century when newly developing groups like Mormonism, New Thought, and Jehovah’s Witnesses began to trouble the religious landscape in North America (Cowan, 2003; Melton, 2006). At times acting in concert, though for their own, distinct purposes, both the Christian CCM and the secular ACM have lobbied for institutional and legal structures that oppose ARMs. Both have produced bodies of scholarly literature on the topic and advocate particular modes of therapeutic practice for work with those involved with ARMs (e.g. deprogramming, exit-counselling, and faith-based counselling). Activism and advocacy from the ACM/CCM have greatly influenced public perceptions of ARMs and shaped both therapeutic and child-welfare interventions (Coates, 2012b; Healy, 2011; Wright & Palmer, 2018). Consequently, these organizations, themselves social movements, have been the subject of academic attention (Cowan, 2003; Introvigne, 1995; Shupe & Darnell, 2006).

Therapeutic Perspectives

Sociologists, religious studies scholars, and anthropologists have largely shifted away from viewing ARMs as “destructive cults” and from using mind control as a means to explain how these groups recruit and retain members. Conversion to ARMs has been convincingly explained as part of typical socialization processes without involving the somewhat mystical theory of brainwashing (Barker, 1984; Greil & Rudy, 1984; Richardson, 1985; Richardson, 2012; Robbins, 1988). This shift does not hold true for many counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists (a group henceforth called “therapists”) who, as pointed out by the numerous

scholars who critique brainwashing theories, continue to view ARMs as inherently harmful, and those involved with ARMs as inherently harmed (Coates, 2010; Coates, 2013; Healy, 2011; Healy, 2016; Lilliston & Shepherd, 2012, Saliba, 2003; Steidinger, 2018). Saliba (2016) summarizes the perspective that dominates the therapeutic literature as the understanding that ARM members' "intellectual and emotional lives have been literally impaired by the teachings and lifestyles of the new religions" (p. 5). Difficulty in counselling those involved with ARMs is further complicated by a more general lack of spiritual and religious competency common among therapists. Religious competency is not part of most counselling education, and many therapists may be uncomfortable and unprepared to include this in their practice. This discomfort may be intensified when a client discloses having been involved with a group that they understand to be a "cult."

There are several reasons why many therapists might share these particularly negative views of ARMs. First, almost by definition, therapists find themselves working with people who are facing challenges in their lives and, so, are likely to encounter former members who are struggling and who may view their ARM involvement as harmful. Much of the therapeutic literature is based on the experiences of former members who are receiving therapy or who feel they have had a harmful ARM experience, and problematically generalizes from these accounts (e.g. Jenkinson, 2016; Matthews & Salazar, 2014). Former members who have had distressing experiences sometimes go on to be therapists and academics themselves, and their personal perspectives inform their clinical and scholarly work (Steidinger, 2018). Further, some therapists have a vested, monetary interest in continuing to construe ARMs as harmful organizations and members as victims requiring specialized services (Lilliston & Shepherd, 2012). That is, some therapists have built their professional practice around offering support to current and former

ARM members who are portrayed as victims of “cults” in need of intervention that can only be provided by a specialized therapist trained in undoing the effects of brainwashing (e.g. Steve Hassan, Rick Ross, Michael Langone). As a result, the current body of therapeutic literature presents an uneven, largely negative picture of ARM involvement and a narrow perspective on what effective helping looks like.

A stark contrast in the therapeutic literature emerges depending on what search terms are used. Searching the literature using the word “cult” generates hundreds of books and articles, mainly written by therapists and based on their anecdotal experience of counselling former members. Searching the literature using the phrase “new religious movements”⁵ generates only a handful of material and is often concerned with refuting the brainwashing model so often used by therapists. However, “new religious movement” is an insider, academic term and likely one that few therapists are familiar with. When a therapist works with a client who is concerned that they are or have been involved with an unhealthy religious group, the therapist might reasonably explore the popular and academic literature on the topic. Unless they have been alerted to do otherwise, they are likely to use the word “cult” in their search. As has been explained previously, “cult” is always used in a pejorative way and indicates the author’s stance on topics like brainwashing. For a therapist who is a layperson on the topic of ARMs, it can be difficult to find literature and resources beyond the brainwashing model. Healey (2016) writes:

When it comes to counselling ex-members, there is little other specific literature to recommend and therefore the brainwashing model, although it does not seem to be the only influence, becomes the predominant foundation of understanding cult/NRM

⁵ While my own preference is for “alternative religious movement,” “new religious movement” remains the standard terminology among most scholars.

involvement for many who counsel ex-members and inform families of current members, (p. 44).

Much of the therapeutic perspective on counselling and ARMs is based on the work of Berkley psychologist Margaret Singer (2004), one of the foremost scholars to advocate for the role of brainwashing in ARM conversion. Singer served as an expert witness for a number of high-profile court cases including the trial of Patty Hearst, whom she claimed was brainwashed into joining the Symbionese Liberation Army and participating in an armed robbery (Prophet, 2018). Singer was also an advocate of deprogramming, a pseudo-therapeutic process where members of NRMs are sometimes forcibly removed (abducted) from their religious communities to undergo a process of deconversion which they did not ask for (Coates, 2012a; Richardson, 2011). Deprogramming is usually initiated by concerned family members who contract a therapist to intervene in the hopes that their loved ones will renounce their new-found ARM membership (Barker, 1986; LeMoult, 1978; Richardson, 2011; Robbins, 2001). Singer's perspective on ARM involvement allows concerned families to view a member's involvement as the result of malicious mind-control (Enroth, 2012; Levine, 1984; Richardson, 2011, Saliba, 2016). With this framing, parents need to be on guard to protect young people from getting involved with ARMs (Barker, 1984; Levine, 1984; Martin, 2003; Singer, 2004). An otherwise "well-adjusted" young person might be walking down the street, encounter a recruiter, and find themselves whisked off to a commune despite their own better judgment.

Following Singer, the most prominent therapists who specialize in ARMs include Steve Hassan, Rick Ross, and Michael Langone. Hassan is a counsellor offering services for what he calls intervention as well as recovery (i.e., he helps concerned families dissuade loved ones from ARM involvement and also offers counselling for former members). Hassan (1990; 2012), has

authored the books *Combatting Cult Mind Control* and *Freedom of Mind: Helping Loved Ones Leave Controlling People, Cults and Beliefs*, promotes himself as “America’s leading cult expert,” and is often interviewed by major news networks (Hassan’s website can be found here: <https://freedomofmind.com/>). Hassan is also a former member of the Unification Church (popularly known as Moonies). Ross (2014) is the author of *Cults Inside Out: How People Get in and Can Get Out*. He operates a registered non-profit providing information about ARMs he deems dangerous. Though I have not been able to ascertain information about his counselling training, higher education, or credentials, he indicates that he can be hired as a professional deprogrammer and expert witness and promotes himself as a resource for therapists, concerned family members, and former members (Ross’s website can be found here: <https://culteducation.com>). In 1995, Ross was successfully sued for the forcible deprogramming (abduction) of an ARM member (Wright, 1998). This is by far not the only incident of forced interventions and deprogramming, though the practice of abducting ARM members has largely fallen out of favour (Barker, 1986; LeMoult, 1978; Richardson, 2011; Robbins, 2001). Langone (1993a) is a counselling psychologist and editor of the scholarly book *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse*, for which Margaret Singer was a contributor. Langone is also the executive director of the anti-cult organization The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)⁶ which publishes a refereed scholarly journal. Langone’s negative view of ARMs comes from what he sees as their un-American ideology and he repudiates what he understands to be contemporary political correctness and multiculturalism, stating that pluralism cannot be extended to included ARMs (Langone, 1986; 1993b). The ICSA also offers

⁶ The ICSA is formerly known as The American Family Association. Their website is available here: <https://www.icsahome.com/home>

a considerable number of resources and materials for counsellors, all from an anti-cult, brainwashing perspective.

Working from the perspective of brainwashing and the assumption that ARM involvement is harmful has meant that, often, the primary goal of therapy, as indicated in much of the therapeutic literature, is undoing the impacts of coercive mind control (Coates, 2011; Lilliston & Shepherd, 2012; Saliba, 2003). It has also been proposed that ARM involvement suppresses an individual's "authentic" personality with a "pseudo-personality" imposed by the group and the leader (West & Martin, 1994). Thus, another goal of counselling is to bring a client in touch with their suppressed "authentic self" (Jenkinson, 2016). With these predetermined goals, the therapist may approach work with the client from the perspective that they know what is "wrong" and how to fix it; a perspective which may limit their ability to remain curious to the client's experience. This is a particularly pathologizing approach, ultimately framing ARM involvement as something to be recovered from (Anthony, 2001; Richardson, 2011; Robbins & Anthony, 1982). It is also an individualistic interpretation of ARM involvement. ARMs arise in responses to social circumstances and an individual's motivations for joining must similarly be situated within multiple, intersecting social determinants. The therapeutic literature is replete with words like "victim", "survivor" and "escape." This underscores the perspective that little agency is involved in ARM membership and precludes the possibility of choice and, at the same time, responsibility.

This therapeutic framework is mainly focussed on providing help for those who join ARMs as adults. Comparatively, there is scant literature on supporting those who were raised in ARMs. However, the needs of those raised in ARMs are construed in much the same way as for adults who joined. Since there is a widespread belief that any ARM involvement is harmful,

there is an accompanying assumption, critiqued and summarized by Lilliston and Shepherd (2012), that “those who are reared in a cult cannot be normal since they are socialised into the pathological patterns of the adult cult members” (p. 124). This literature search located only one study that has been conducted from a therapeutic perspective on the experiences of people raised in ARMs (Matthews & Salazar, 2014). Fifteen participants (14 females; one male) were solicited through the International Cultic Studies Association referral base and two, online “cult recovery groups” in the United States. By including only participants who are seeking help for their troubling ARM experiences, the study has the same limitations as many others in the therapeutic literature. The study is firmly located within the “destructive cult” framework and contains many unverified assertions about those raised in ARMs. For example, Matthews and Salazar (2014) state, “Individuals born and raised in cults are more likely than others to experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; neglect; attachment disorders; lack of education and marketable job skills; lack of decision-making and socialization skills; and suffer from anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation” (p. 190). In support of this, the only citation is an article by Furnari (2005) published in the e-newsletter of the website *Spiritual Abuse Resources*. Furnari’s article does not indicate from where she derives these assertions.

An interesting book that warrants inclusion in this section is Lalich and McLaren’s (2018), *Escaping utopia: Growing up in a cult, getting out, and starting over*.⁷ The book

⁷ Though based on a sociological study conducted through the University of California, Chico, and published by an academic press, this book is best understood as popular self-help literature, making it difficult to categorize for this review. However, since its stated aim is therapeutic and because a therapist would be highly likely to encounter it when searching for literature on ARMs, it has been included in this section, rather than in the section on sociological perspectives.

provides a kind of self-help guide for those raised in ARMs. Lalich, a professor emerita of sociology who has often worked with Margaret Singer, and McLaren, a practicing therapist, are both self-described “cult survivors.” The book draws on a sociological study conducted by Lalich which included interviews with 65 adults (50 female; 15 male) who identified as being raised in a “cult” and who went on to leave their groups. Lalich does not indicate how participants were recruited.⁸ Interviews were analyzed according to Lalich’s bounded-choice theory (Lalich, 2004). Bounded-choice theory may be understood as an alternative or, at least an update, to traditional brainwashing models. Bounded-choice proposes that intense socialization into and identification with isolated, authoritarian groups creates an environment where members, as Dawson (2005) summarizes, “come to accept a highly limited conception of their choices as natural” (p. 663). Lalich proposes that the four dimensions of bounded choice are a transcendent belief system, charismatic authority, systems of control, and systems of influence (Lalich & McLaren, 2018). The book focuses on six selected case studies which are examined through this theory.

Lalich and McLaren (2018) situate themselves within an anti-cult framework, stating that, “once you know what to look for, you will see that all cults are very similar to one another, even though their stated goals, actions, and worldviews may be completely different” (p. 7) and “we need to understand them so we can protect ourselves against cult indoctrination and manipulation” (p. 7). Aside from acting as a therapeutic guide for those raised in ARMs, Lalich and McLaren (2018) state that their goal is to, “help you learn, in a step-by-step way, how to

⁸ This review was not able to locate any other scholarly publications relating to this study and, thus, methodological details are lacking. There is no literature review and little reference to other scholarly sources on children in ARMs. For example, there are two recent, rigorous, and thorough sociological studies about children in ARMs (Frisk et al. 2018; van Twist, 2015) that present quite a different perspective, neither of which are mentioned.

read those signals correctly so that cultic groups cannot gain influence over you or your loved ones” (p. 5). Among others, the authors indicate they draw their perspective on ARMs from Singer, Lifton, Zablocki, and psychiatrist Bruce Perry. The authors propose that a “cult” is any group, typically but not necessarily religious, that stifles individuality and critical thinking, requires intense commitment, and restricts autonomy. They further suggest that a “cult” might be as small as an individual family, or as large as a corporation, using Enron as an example.

Because the book is not organized as a scholarly work (there is no literature review, findings, discussion, limitations, and only a brief mention of methodology included in an appendix) it is difficult to summarize Lalich and McLaren’s conclusions. The book is also unclear in its purpose. While generally speaking to those who were raised in and then left ARMs, it also includes advice and checklists for those who are concerned that they or a loved one might be involved in an abusive religion. Further, the authors write that it is their hope to educate the general public, as well as to “inform helping professionals in any place where cult escapees might land” (p. 170). Overall, the book suggests that those raised in ARMs are victims and survivors. The experience is one to escape and to recover from. The authors also suggest that abuse of all kinds is a common-place occurrence in ARMs though they do not provide specific evidence from the study or any other source to support this. It is suggested that one common trauma is loss of an identity that has been strongly rooted in the group, and narratives from the case studies describe difficulty in adjusting to life on the outside. It is also suggested that specialized support for those raised in ARMs would be helpful. While any scholarly publications resulting from this study (none were located for this review) may eventually offer a more nuanced perspective of the ARM experience, this book is largely concerned with presenting a one-dimensional narrative of harm, escape, and trauma. As Ashcroft (2019) stated in his review

of the book it, “it collapses all testimony into an all-or-nothing viewpoint: good and bad people, victims and victimizers, populate the stories on which this book is based” (p. 137).

A recent volume edited by Harvey, Steidinger, and Beckford (2018) represents the first attempt to bring together diverse perspectives on counselling with ARM members – both current and former. The book is particularly illuminating because it allows space for multiple viewpoints on what has proven to be a heated topic. Some authors represent the more established, anti-cult perspective. For example, Szimhart (2018) uses the analogy of flies trapped in a bottle to portray the way ARM members are confined by their religious movements and in need of specialized counselling to navigate their way out. Goldberg’s (2018) chapter presents a psychoeducational and psychodynamic approach where the primary aim of therapy is to educate the member/former member about the ways they have been subjected to brainwashing techniques. Linda and Rodrick Dubrow-Marshall (2018) suggest that members lose their self-identity when they join ARMs and a primary goal of therapy is to assist the person in connecting with the self that has been suppressed, with particular focus on enhanced critical thinking and decision-making skills. Each of these chapters, typical of much therapeutic literature on the topic, works from the underlying assumption that the member/former member is psychologically trapped, misinformed, or otherwise does not have sufficient means to achieve psychological wellness. In other words, they are a victim with little agency who requires a specially trained therapist to rescue, correct, or re-orient them or, as Szimhart (2018) puts it, to “show the fly the way out of the bottle,” (p. 96).

At the same time, the volume includes a chapter written by a Scientologist who details the benefits of the Scientology practice of auditing (Roux, 2018); a chapter containing the reflections of a member of the Unification Church who has benefitted from family counselling for a number of years (Cooper, 2018); and a Pagan who is herself a therapist and finds this

sometimes limiting and sometimes helpful with clients of all kinds (Crowley, 2018). Harvey, Steidinger, and Beckford's (2018) book offers valuable insights on what productive therapy with current and former ARM members might look like. Therapy with ARM members should contain the possibility that a member's involvement holds some meaning and purpose for them (Pearson, 2018). An ARM member should not be forced into counselling (Laaninen, 2018). ARM members should feel they have the ability to choose their own path without being influenced by a counsellor's personal feelings, and concerns about a religious group should be presented in a factual, supportive, calm way (Steidinger, 2018). These few chapters stand out in contrast to the majority of the literature and represent some initial steps in the direction of diversifying therapeutic approaches to those involved with ARMs.

Fisher (2017) suggests that therapists working with clients in religious transition more generally, "could better serve this population through not assuming the clients' existing or previously held beliefs will either assist *or* hinder treatment" (p. 364). Certainly, there is a long way to go in extending this kind of thinking to those involved with ARMs, and particularly to those raised in ARMs. At the same time, many therapists are likely already doing excellent, emergent work with their ARM clients. There is still a need, however, for robust literature from diverse perspectives to support them in their efforts. Therapists may also struggle in counselling those involved with ARMs because of a more general lack of religious literacy (Pearson, 2018). While it is accepted that religion and spirituality can play a key role in the health and wellbeing of clients, education around the integration of religion and spirituality into therapeutic practice is not a regular part of counselling education (Canda, 2005; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2014). Therapists report feeling uncomfortable and unprepared to address clients' religious and spiritual needs or to draw on these resources when helping (Ramos

& Chavez, 2019). Practitioners are likely to feel even less prepared when a client reports a negative or troubling religious experience. It is not surprising, then, given this lack of literacy and discomfort, that even well-educated and well-prepared therapists struggle to counsel those involved with ARMs.

Child Welfare Perspectives

Though there is little that unites the theology, organizational structure, and history of ARMs, these groups share the experience of being popularly viewed as potentially harmful to children. Some ARMs represent very conservative value systems, while others extremely progressive, left-wing political groups. Similarly, little unites these groups' attitudes towards children. Some, like the Sons of Freedom (a sect within the Doukhobors who settled in Canada) saw their children as having supreme importance and a special destiny (Berikoff, 2013). Others, like the Rajneeshees (a new-age movement that arose in India and eventually formed a community in Oregon, USA) paid little attention to children (Guest, 2004). Nonetheless, ARMs have warranted special attention over concerns about the wellbeing of children raised in these groups.

Accusations of harm towards children in ARMs are based on the idea of “collective child abuse” or the notion that “all children in certain groups are being harmed just by being in a group that adheres to certain beliefs and practices thought by some to be harmful to children” (Richardson, 1999, p. 175). Consistent with this view, mass raids have been one of the primary tools of child protection in controversial religious communities (Palmer, 1999b; Palmer, 2011; Wright & Palmer, 2016; Wright & Palmer, 2018). These raids are most often facilitated jointly by police and social services. The notion that ARMs put children at special risk is not new, nor are military style raids as a means of enacting child protection. As early as the 1950s, both the

Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints community of Short Creek, Arizona, and the Sons of Freedom Doukhobor community in British Columbia, experienced mass raids and the removal of their children (Berikoff, 2013; Bradly-Evans, 2014). In the first study that considered patterns of raids on alternative religious communities, Wright and Palmer (2016; 2018) compiled data on state-sponsored raids in 19 Euro-Western countries since the 1940s. They found a sharp rise in raids beginning in the 1990s. Wright and Palmer attribute this to an increase in child abuse accusations made towards ARMs, spurred largely by the mobilization of the anti-cult movement.

As brainwashing fell out of scholarly favour and ceased to be a viable defense in American courts, accusations of harm in ARMs began to centre instead on the wellbeing of children.

Schreinert and Richardson (2011) write, “A major shift in the social control paradigm occurred as the ‘brainwashing/mind control’ narrative diminished in importance and the ‘child abuse’ motif emerged as the principal rhetorical weapon to combat ‘cults’” (Schreinert & Richardson, 2011, p. 245). In addition, and has been discussed above, the overall social and moral panic over children’s welfare during the 1990s created an atmosphere of concern for the safety of children more generally.

While there are numerous cases of raids on ARMs in The United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia, the most devastating occurred in Waco, Texas in 1993 (Palmer, 2011; Tabor & Gallagher, 1995; Wright & Palmer, 2018). The ostensible motive for the raid at Waco was accusations of child abuse in the community (Homer, 1999; Ellison & Bartkowski, 1995; Wright & Fagen, 2011). After a 51-day stand-off, FBI agents stormed the compound of the Branch Davidians in a military raid, an act that led to the death of 76 Davidians, including 26 children (Tabor & Gallagher, 1995). The framing of fringe religions as necessarily harmful, members as brainwashed, and collective child abuse all played a role in constructing this disaster. “Cult

expert” Rick Ross was consulted by the FBI, as well as prominent psychiatrist Bruce Perry, who is a noted anti-cult activist (Wright & Palmer, 2016). Perry’s expertise was sought though he had never had contact with any Branch Davidian members prior to his FBI involvement, and Ross, who holds no credentials aside from this self-appointed status as a “cult expert,” had only ever met one member during a “deprogramming” intervention he facilitated (Ammerman, 1995; Tabor & Gallagher, 1995; Wright & Fagen, 2011). Neither was familiar with these particular members or the theology of this group (Ammerman, 1995). Their insights and advice were based on their perceived broad understanding of all ARMs. In this case, like others, the limited and partial experience of a few “experts” who are active in the ACM and who are otherwise engaged in private, therapeutic practice, provide the rationale and impetus for state intervention and further blur the lines between clinical practice, the anti-cult movement, and child welfare interventions.

Aside from Waco, perhaps the best know ARM/child protection case is the 2008 raid on the Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) community Yearning for Zion (YFZ). In 2008, based on a series of phone calls later determined to be fraudulent, state police and child protection authorities raided the YFZ ranch in El Dorado, Texas, USA, and removed all 439 children in the largest mass child apprehension in United States history (Weaver, 2010; Wright & Richardson, 2011).⁹ Wright and Richardson (2011) explain that the military style raid included “SWAT teams with automatic weapons and agents festooned in camouflage, Kevlar helmets, and vests, and flanked by helicopters, dozens of law enforcement vehicles and an armored personnel carrier” (p. 7). Allegations of abuse were largely unsubstantiated and the raid was deemed

⁹ During the raid, an additional 29 women were removed when they were mistakenly assumed to be minors.

unlawful, resulting in nearly all children being returned to their families on the ranch, though, for most, this occurred over a year later. As with Waco, psychiatrist Bruce Perry was hired as a state expert in the case, claiming to specialize in children and ARMs (Wright and Palmer, 2016).

The FLDS incident is revealing in several ways. First, it shows the way that the construction of collective child abuse is used to justify mass apprehensions, with the child welfare department explicitly stating that the FLDS culture put all children at risk of harm (Dunn, 2009). Second, it demonstrates the pervasive prejudice against ARMs, particularly those with sexual practices and family structures that are considered atypical. In this way, sexual abuse, in particular, is portrayed as a problem typical of “weird” religious communities while the intervention does nothing to address the systemic and, by now, well known factors that contribute to sexual abuse, such as poverty, isolation, and male supremacy (Bennion, 2006). This case also highlights the way mainstream and alternative religions receive different treatment in the political-legal system. Though there is substantial evidence of child sexual abuse and subsequent cover-ups in the Catholic Church, there have been no mass raids on Catholic homes or Catholic schools, nor large-scale media efforts to portray all Catholic children at risk of harm because of their religious beliefs. Last, and perhaps most troubling, the mass raid has prevented meaningful help from being brought to those in the community who were, most certainly, suffering abuse and neglect. As Goodwin (2018) eloquently explains, these actions:

Discouraged FLDS women who might want to leave the community from seeking state social services and exacerbated the community’s isolation. This is not to say that we should not concern ourselves with the plight of abused women. Far from it. But we must also concern ourselves with how our attempts to “save” women from their religion often work to damage the very women we try to save (p. 253).

Several years ago, I spoke with a young man who had been apprehended during the 2008 raid. Like other children, he was subsequently returned. In our conversation, he described the difficult and abusive circumstances of his upbringing in the YFZ community. Yet when he decided to leave, still a minor, he did so without reaching out to child protection authorities and relied, instead, on a network of informal support. His distrust of social workers and the child welfare system resulting from the raid limited the help available to him.

A lesser known but highly significant event involves MOVE,¹⁰ originally called the Christian Movement for Life, which has been active in Philadelphia since the 1970s (Cleaver, 1993). MOVE is a primarily Black, anarcho-primitivist group that lives according to the teachings of its founder, John Africa (Cleaver, 1993). In the mid 1980s, the group was living communally in West Philadelphia. The group of Black liberationist and environmental advocates emphasized the sacredness and equality of all living beings and regularly protested for animal rights, against police brutality, racism, and industrial pollution (Boyette & Boyette, 1989, Wagner-Paciffici, 1994). The group received considerable attention from neighbors and public officials because of their vocal, anti-government activities (Boyette & Boyette, 1989). In 1985, after “10,000 rounds of ammunition, tear gas and explosives failed to break down the heavily fortified MOVE house,” the city of Philadelphia bombed the homes of MOVE members (Philadelphia Special Investigation, 1986, para 3). The bombing caused a significant fire that subsequently destroyed 61 homes and damaged over 100 others (Philadelphia Special Investigation, 1986). The attack killed 11 members including 5 children. A subsequent investigation and lawsuit demonstrated that officials were aware that children were present in the home at the time of the bombing, however no attempt was made to remove them prior to the

¹⁰ Not an acronym.

attack (Boyette & Boyette, 1989). While orchestrating the attack, government officials expressed concern that these Black children might be armed and dangerous. In contrast, there would be significant concern over the welfare of the children at Waco and YFZ, and “rescuing” these white children served as the official impetus for these state raids. The same concern was not afforded to the Black children in MOVE. The question of whether the MOVE children were victims of a radical religious/political movement or young combatants is central to understanding the events that transpired (Wagner-Pacifici, 1994). The differential treatment and protection afforded to the racialized children of MOVE is apparent. The children at Waco and YFZ would be portrayed as young victims, while the children in MOVE were portrayed as young extremists. There remains little scholarship on the MOVE bombing, a largely forgotten episode in American history, yet virtual mountains of scholarship on Waco and YFZ.

Despite these highly publicized raids on ARM communities and the assumption of harm that characterizes ARM involvement, there is remarkably little literature from social services that presents a child protection perspective on work with families in ARMs. Though the phenomenon of raids in ARMs has received much legal and sociological attention, child welfare practice in controversial religions is not often taken up by social service scholars. I was unable to locate any articles from social work (and related) fields with a specific focus on mass raids as a tool of child protection. Only two articles were located from social work that considered social service practice with children in ARMs, broadly speaking (Bardin, 2005; Bardin, 2009). In these articles, Bardin relies on anti-cult literature and scholars (e.g. Singer, Langone) and is quick to dismiss studies suggesting the adequate psychological well-being of children in ARMs. Bardin, like other anti-cult scholars, suggests that studies conducted with those currently in ARMs are inherently suspect and unlikely to generate accurate findings. Bardin’s 2005 article presents findings from a

study she conducted with 14 adults who were raised in polygamous Mormon communities. Her 2009 study builds on her earlier work and includes the addition of 25 participants who were raised in the controversial religious group The Family International (formerly known as The Children of God). Here, participants were recruited from a website that offers support to those raised in The Family International, with particular focus on abusive experiences. As with much of the therapeutic literature, this approach privileges the experiences of former members who had particularly harmful experiences. The findings in both studies show high levels of distress and dysfunction, and indicate pervasive physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and lack of education. Though Bardin suggests that it is important for social workers to understand the beliefs and practices of particular groups, she also indicates that what she terms isolated, authoritarian groups share structural similarities that are more significant than these practical and theological differences, allowing workers to take a generalized approach to those in ARMs based on these perceived similarities. Bardin (2009) does, however, acknowledge the ineffectiveness of mass raids, suggesting “They may hurt children, feed members’ fear of outsiders, reinforce the group’s sense of persecution, and facilitate accusations of bias and bigotry” (p. 132). She also suggests that it is important for workers to manage their reactions to practices that might appear unusual and must be careful not to let stereotyped assumptions guide social work practice.

In the summer of 2013, I arranged to visit a small, communal, alternative religious group in British Columbia called The Twelve Tribes Community. When I arrived, my contact introduced me as a sociology student. I quickly corrected him – apparently there had been a miscommunication somewhere in the email chain – and said that I was a child and youth care student. The tone in the room immediately went from warm and inviting to suspicious and guarded. I jumped in with some kind of awkward justification, explaining that I was not “*that*

kind” of a worker. It was only after I spoke a bit about my own divergent religious background that the conversation again became friendly. It is worth noting that in 1984 one of the Twelve Tribes communities in Vermont had all of their children apprehended in a mass raid following allegations of child abuse that were later unsubstantiated (Wright & Richardson, 2011). The children were returned the same day. One of the methodological challenges used to defend the lack of social service research with ARMs is that these groups are resistant to contact with the outside world (Ayella, 1990). While this is sometimes the case, there is a substantial body of *sociological* work with diverse ARMs that spans decades. It would seem that many ARMs are not opposed to working with researchers in general, but with social service workers specifically – and for very good reason. It seems to be presumed that it would be too difficult for social service workers to conduct research with current members of ARMs. However, to my knowledge, such a study has not been attempted.

2.4 Sociological Perspectives

To date, there have been three sociological books that specifically examine the experiences of those raised in ARMs. *Children in minority religions: Growing up in controversial religious groups* (Frisk, Nilsson, & Åckerbäck, 2018), *Perfect children: growing up on the religious fringe* (van Twist, 2015) and *Children in new religions* (Palmer & Hardman, 1999). These volumes and the handful of academic papers and encyclopedia entries that accompany them represent the entirety of sociological work on the topic. The interpretations and conclusions presented in this body of literature offers a stark contrast to the therapeutic and child welfare literature. Sociological work on children in ARMs tends to include more accounts from those currently involved rather than those who have grown up and exited.

Palmer and Hardman's (1999) edited volume was the first academic book to consider the topic of children in ARMs. Often relying on interviews with children and their families, contributors presented findings from studies conducted with diverse groups including Wicca (Berger, 1999); International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Rochford, 1999); the Osho movement (followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) (Puttick, 1999); Sahaja Yoga (Coney, 1999) In Search of Truth (a communal Christian group in the United States) (Siegler, 1999) and children raised in Damanhur (a communal, spiritualist group in Italy) (Introvigne, 1999). As Palmer and Harman (1999) reflect in their introduction, many ARMs are united by their revolutionary and reformative nature. Responding to what they see as the ills and deficits in broader culture, their conceptions and expectations of childhood may diverge significantly from the surrounding society which can lead to heightened tensions including concerns about children's wellbeing. Groups who are beginning to incorporate a new generation face the often-chaotic task of determining what successful socialization for these newcomers will entail. While many begin with high ideals for family life and child-rearing, there is often a contrast between a community's hopes for their children and how these are realized (or not) in practice.

van Twist's (2015) work considers children in mainly (though not exclusively) communal and controversial ARMs with particular attention to how "successful" and "failed" socialization is conceptualized. The research draws on 30 interviews with those who were raised in ARMs and either chose to remain or leave, in addition to interviews with parents and caregivers, participant-observation studies, analysis of child-rearing material from the groups, and information from online discussion forums.¹¹ Groups given special focus here are the Bruderhof,

¹¹ Methodological details are lacking in this book. In a review, Wollschleger (2017) points out that it is not always clear how interviews are distributed across groups or across members and

Church of Scientology, The Family International (also known as The Children of God), Unification Church (popularly called Moonies), and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishna). ARMs, who almost by definition are reactionary groups that create societies set apart from the mainstream, must determine how to socialize their children to take on an identity that is fundamentally based on remaining distinct. Too loose of a grip on a new generation results in a loss of this important boundary between “our world” and “the outside world,” while too tight of a grip can lead to rebellion and high rates of attrition. van Twist (2015) introduces the useful concept of “segregated socialization” (p. 5). She concludes that the defining feature among those raised in ARMs, whether they remain with their group or leave, is that they have been socialized into a subculture that they understand to be fundamentally different from broader society.

van Twist devotes a chapter to those who leave their ARMs. Some fled abuse and deep unhappiness while others decided the group simply was not for them and felt they wanted more from life than the group could offer. Some experienced leaving as traumatic, while for others it was significant life event but not attended by hardship. Experiences were mediated by factors such as their level of integration into the group, supports and resources available to them on the outside, and the quality of relationship they were able to maintain with their family of origin. In other words, some lost more than others in leaving, and some had access to more resources in the transition. Some, particularly those who suffered abuse, looked back on their childhoods with anger, while others had mixed feelings. Some people who leave ARMs go on to create online support groups. van Twist notes that these groups are often highly critical of their former

former members. I note that I could not find information on how participants were recruited or what countries are represented.

religious communities, making it difficult for them to serve the needs of the diverse young people with diverse experiences who have left for diverse reasons. She further notes that mainstream supports (therapists, para-church organizations, social services) seemed ill-prepared to help these young ex-members who may be in an unusual circumstance and dealing with unconventional concerns. van Twist (2015) suggests that those who leave have “an unusual combination of ordinary and specialized needs” (p. 176). They are ordinary in the sense that they must navigate expected life course events along with their mainstream peers; issues that can be addressed with help opening a bank account, securing housing, or applying for university. Yet their needs may also be specialized in the sense that these young people might face existential concerns not expressed by their peers. Further, those who leave ARMs face challenges that those who remain do not; indeed, for some, hardship and distress was primarily the result of leaving and not necessarily because of their divergent childhoods. Moving from one culture into another carries challenges and feeling like they did not fit in anywhere is commonly reported among the “leavers” in van Twist’s research. What these hardships might entail varied significantly, especially depending on the group. For example, some who were raised in groups that were particularly sexually permissive found mainstream society to be oddly prudish. Some felt their group stunted their development, while others felt they were enabled to grow up quickly; in either case the result was feeling out of step with their same-age peers. Each must figure out how to manage the “cult” label they seem to carry. Some embraced their role as a rebel and worked hard to define themselves in contrast to their former lives. van Twist notes that many were eager to find another worldview or religion to whole-heartedly embrace as a kind of replacement. Most wanted to quickly adapt to the norms of mainstream society and, thus, were eager to label their ARM pasts as deviant and unacceptable.

Frisk, Nilsson and Åkerbäck's (2018) volume presents findings from a research project *Kids in cults: Religious upbringings in minority religions in Sweden*. The study consisted of interviews with current and former members who are/were raised in ARMs in Sweden and is by far the most thorough and rigorous research conducted about children in ARMs. Groups represented are the Church of Scientology, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishna), Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, The Unification Church (popularly called Moonies), the Family International, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Swedish Pentecostal group Knutby Filadelfia. Some participants were gathered through exit support networks and some were recommended by the groups themselves. Fifty-three interviews were conducted with those who were raised in these groups. Among these, around three quarters chose to remain and one quarter left. An additional 22 interviews were conducted with parents. The number of male and female participants was approximately equal.

The authors note that making general conclusions about the state of children in ARMs is difficult. Each group considered here had different teachings regarding children and different ideas about what child-rearing should look like. Further, groups change over time, sometimes significantly, and different locales provide for varied religious experiences. In other words, one Jehovah's Witness congregation might be very different from the next, and both will change over the course of time. Individual parents and individual children are also different, with some families strictly applying a group's teachings while another might interpret things more loosely. Along with this, groups differ in regard to how they will treat ex-members. The level of rejection experienced informed the experiences of leaving. Frisk, Nilsson and Åkerbäck note that members' and ex-members' recollections of their childhoods differ, with ex-members

remembering more restrictive, unhappy situations and current members emphasizing the benefits of the experience.

While some of the groups included here have historically practiced a style of communal living that separated children from their parents, this was not the case for any of the participants in this study. Neglect was not indicated and very few experienced corporal punishment. One case of sexual abuse was reported. The authors note that all of the groups were characterized by strong social bonds with children often forming close, lifelong friendships with other members. The downside of this experience was a sense of alienation from mainstream culture, a factor that brought about challenges when children went to public school or if they eventually chose to leave. If the children went to public school, it was, the authors note, “common to talk about these friendships as not being of the deep kind that they have with peers in their religious groups” (Frisk, Nilsson and Åkerbäck, 2018, p. 404). Both former and current members seemed acutely aware that their religious groups were seen to be unusual and unpopular within secular, Swedish society. Members and ex-members reported being bullied with some choosing to hide their religious identities at school. Frisk (2018a) explains, “The behaviour of wider society is also implicated here, however, as the non-acceptance of cultural differences can influence the level of problems strongly experience by children growing up in the context of minority religions” (p. 90). For those who left, varied experiences are reported. Some ex-members report that their non-mainstream childhoods were valuable. Frisk (2018b) summarizes: “For example, some ex-members talk about the ethical standards maintained by their former group, which they consider to be positive and also useful for life in mainstream society (for instance, learning to help other people and to be empathetic, being able to socialize with people of all ages, having the confidence to lecture before a group)” (p. 205). At the same time, Frisk (2018b) also notes that a

number reported “negative psychological implications...such as inner anxiety, feelings of abandonment/rejection, social isolation/limitations, and a sense of being ‘chosen’ or ‘special’ (which was not always interpreted in a positive way)” (p. 205). This study suggests that those who leave often have a pattern of rebellion that begins early in life, while those who remain are given more towards conformity within their group. Leaving their groups often took a long period of time, sometime years, and was aided by new social networks and affective bonds formed outside the group.

2.5 Religious Conversion, Deconversion, and Disaffiliation

Within the Euro-Western world, there has been a rise in those who are leaving organized religion, sometimes to embrace an explicitly atheist identity or sometimes to join the ranks of the many who call themselves “spiritual but not religious” (Johnson, 2014; Pew Research Centre, 2017; Schlehofer et al, 2008; Watts, 2018; Zinnbauer et. al., 1997). It would seem critical, then, to understand how processes of deconversion and disaffiliation are being lived and enacted. Despite this, the study of religious deconversion remains almost an afterthought within the broader field of conversion studies (Bromley, 1991; Fisher, 2017; Gooren, 2011; Streib & Keller, 2004). Use of the words “deconversion” and “disaffiliation” are inconsistent in the literature. At times, they are conflated and describe processes that include religious switching, loss of faith or belief, apostacy, abdicating formal membership, and informally dis-identifying as a member. For example, Streib et al. (2009) propose that deconversion contains the five-fold characteristics of “1. Loss of specific religious experiences 2. Intellectual doubt, denial, or disagreement with specific beliefs 3. Moral criticism 4. Emotional suffering 5. Disaffiliation from the [religious] community” (p. 22). Here, disaffiliation is constituted within the definition. Pérez and Vallières (2019) suggest that deconversion should only be applied to the experience of abandoning

religion and embracing a secular worldview. Barbour (1994), on the other hand, views deconversion as simply “a loss or deprivation of religious faith” (p. 2). Barbour’s definition, like others, belies a generally Christian (and particularly Protestant) presupposition in assuming that “faith” is the defining factor of religious identity. One may become a Christian (at least, a certain type of Christian) by privately “believing” in Jesus Christ and professing faith. However, one may not, for example, similarly declare themselves to be a Jew; there is a level of community and organizational sanction required. In the same way, one may cease to be a certain type of Christian when they sense they have lost a certain type of faith, while the same does not hold true for Jewish identity. Still, the notion that faith and belief are tied up in religious belonging and membership runs through much of the Euro-Western conceptualization of religious identity.

Religious conversion has been of interest to scholars for over a century and was one of the first topics to be examined in the field of psychology. William James (1917) is perhaps the most well-known scholar to consider religious conversion and he devoted much of his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, to exploring the topic. James (1917) proposed that conversion is an experience “by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities” (p. 190). James equated conversion with regeneration; an experience that resulted in a happier, more well-adjusted self. There is little room for agency in James’ (1917) conception, and he emphasized that, ultimately, “self-surrender [to a divine force] becomes then indispensable” (p. 204). The experience of the Biblical Paul on the road to Damascus typifies this perspective, which may be called the Classical Model. One might be going down the road and find themselves struck by a divine force after which conversion – being God’s will - becomes the inevitable result. Alfred Darby Nock (1933), a historian and

contemporary of James, considered conversion to be a reorientation wherein the convert comes to understand their former religious beliefs as wrong and their new religious beliefs as correct. In this way, the convert abandons the old in favour of the new. For James and Nock, conversion is mainly an intellectual experience (hence the emphasis on beliefs), possible only with the “prophetic” religions, and results in leaving one religion (or state of indifference) for something else (Anderson, 2003; Price, 2010; Stalker, 2007).

Conversion became of special interest to scholars in the 60s and 70s when young people began to join ARMs and brainwashing emerged as a way of explaining their religious choices. Indeed, brainwashing is a model of conversion, albeit a model that denotes a conversion in a controversial, possibly dangerous direction. Bromley (2001) writes, “Conversion is a symbolic designation that positively sanctions embeddedness while brainwashing negatively sanctions embeddedness” (p. 318). The brainwashing model has much in common with the Classical Model (Richardson, 1985). In the Classical Model, the active agent in the process of conversion is an outside, divine force whose intervention brings the convert into a higher, more well-developed and mature way of being. As Richardson (1985) proposes, in the brainwashing model, the divine force is substituted with the leader of an ARM, who similarly intervenes in the life of the convert but for their own, nefarious purposes. The powerful and manipulative process of brainwashing is dependent on a similar self-surrender; in the convert abdicating their will.

Much study on conversion has focused on ARMs. In their landmark article, *Becoming a worldsaver: A theory of conversion to a deviant perspective*, Lofland and Stark (1965) interviewed converts to the new and controversial Unification Church, known popularly as the Moonies (referred to as Divine Precepts in their article). From this, they conceived of a process model of conversion, summarized in seven necessary and inter-dependent steps:

For conversion a person must (1) experience enduring and acutely felt tensions (2) within a religious problem-solving perspective, (3) which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker; (4) encountering the D.P. [religious group] at a turning point in his life, (5) wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts; (6) where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized; (7) and where, if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction. (Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 874).

Lofland and Stark's (1965) process model has gone on to become one of the most cited models of religious conversion and represents a turning point in the study of the topic. Whereas the classical and brainwashing models are deterministic and depict a passive individual who is acted upon by an outside force, in Lofland and Stark's model, much rests on an individual's status as seeker and the initial three steps occur before someone has encountered a religious group. Still, once involved with a religious group, the deterministic force is once again at work, and, at this point, the seeker is mainly along for the ride. In a later critique of his own work, Lofland (1977) himself points out this limitation and urges scholars to "turn the process on its head and scrutinize how people go about converting themselves" (p. 817). Richardson (1985) sees Lofland and Stark's model as a kind of bridge between the classical model and the more agentic perspectives developed later. Efforts to gauge the validity of Lofland and Stark's model with diverse religious groups have met with mixed results (Greil and Rudy, 1984; Kox, Meeus & Hart, 1991; Snow and Philips, 1980). The model was developed through the study of a single ARM which presents limitations, with Greil and Rudy (1984) suggesting it is valid only with similar religious groups. Nonetheless, a feature of the model that stands out as enduring is the focus on the affective ties the convert forms with the new group. "Our evidence suggests to us that the crucial dynamic in the conversion process is the process of coming to see oneself as

one's reference group sees one, of coming to see that reality is what one's friends say it is," (Greil & Rudy, 1984, p. 318).

Currently, Rambo's (1999) stage model is one of the most widely referenced typologies of conversion. Rambo's interdisciplinary model builds on Lofland and Stark but is developed from the study of many religious groups with the hope that it would offer if not a universal model then, Rambo (1999) suggests, "a cartography of options in the study of conversion" (p. 267).

Table 1

Rambo's (1993) Stage Model

Stage 1 <i>Context</i>	The environmental circumstances influencing conversion, inclusive of the macro and microsystems of people's lives. The overall culture and social realities of a person's life including kinship ties and friendships.
Stage 2 <i>Crisis</i>	Crises may follow from tragic, life altering circumstances, mystical experiences, or social and political unrest. Crises may also take the form of an aching spiritual need or desire for transcendence. This is the catalyst that propels the convert.
Stage 3 <i>Quest</i>	In this stage, the individual becomes a seeker looking to resolve their crisis through spiritual and religious means.
Stage 4 <i>Encounter</i>	The individual, now a seeker, encounters a religion through religious advocates (missionaries), and/or through media (television programs, religious literature).
Stage 5 <i>Interaction</i>	The individual begins to make the new-found religious community their primary social network through more intensified interaction. They "try on" the religion.
Stage 6 <i>Commitment</i>	If these interactions are successful, the culmination is a new commitment and often a public declaration. This stage is formal affiliation with the new group.
Stage 7 <i>Consequence</i>	The new convert must now live out their conversion. This process of living out and assessing their own conversion will lead the convert either to be affirmed in their choice or begin to doubt.

Like the Classical Model, where the troubled and unhappy individual finds peace and meaning through religion, Rambo's model hinges on a "crisis" that can be resolved through religious means. Here, however, agency is emphasized in a new way, with the troubled seeker questing for resolution. Like Lofland and Stark, there are hints to the key role relationships play.

In the “interaction” stage, the convert dispenses with old relationships in favour of strong, affective ties with those in the new religious group. In other words, they make friends. While the “encounter” stage is conceived of primarily as interactions with missionaries or religious literature and programming, Rambo (1993) acknowledges that “Probably the most successful forms of contact are via friendship and kinship networks, which are obviously the most personal forms,” (p. 80). In the “consequence” stage, affirmation and doubt are presented as opposing outcomes of the process. Though “doubt” and, presumably, deconversion and disaffiliation are alluded to, it is not explored in depth.

Gooren’s (2010) conversion careers model is a more recent addition to the conversion literature and may be best seen as complimentary to Rambo’s (Milton, 2015). Gooren’s model attends to the way religious participation increases and decreases over the course of a lifetime and Gooren suggests his model may describe one’s religious experience within the religion of their birth, or the experiences of those who move between multiple religions. He writes, “The conversion career includes all episodes of higher or lower participation in one or more religious organizations during a person’s life,” (Gooren, 2010, p 3). Gooren’s five-fold typology is summarized below:

Table 2

Gooren’s (2010) Conversion Careers Model

Pre-affiliation	Describes the worldview and social background of potential converts at the point of first contact with the new religion.
Affiliation	The convert formally becomes a member, but this membership is not yet central to their identity.
Conversion	A change in worldview and identity that is based both on self-report and observation by others.
Confession	The theology of the new religion becomes a core part of the convert’s identity and they develop a strong missionary attitude.
Disaffiliation	The convert detaches from the religion.

Here, relationships are key to the process. Gooren (2010) writes, “The conversion process is primarily influenced by significant others (relatives, friends, and acquaintances) through the social networks to which the individual belongs... It is clear from the literature that almost all people, men and women, are recruited to religious organizations through social networks” (p. 141). Like Rambo, Gooren alludes to the possibility of disaffiliation, or, using his preferred terminology, detachment, in his model and attends to it in more detail than previous scholars. While Gooren (2010) conceives of disaffiliation and conversion as two sides of the same coin, what this other “side” might look like is rarely considered in the literature, especially when compared to the voluminous amount of work on conversion.

Rambo (1993) neatly summarizes conversion as a “turning from and to,” (p. 3). By extension, and as has been proposed by Cragun & Hammer (2011), leaving religion may be seen as a form of conversion; turning *from* religion and *to* something else. However, while there does seem to be overlap between the processes of conversion and deconversion/disaffiliation, there are crucial differences that make leaving religion quite different from joining. Religious conversion is often conceived of as a kind of resolution to a crisis, with the unhappy individual finding peace through religious understanding and belonging. While deconversion may also be the result of a crisis, it does not seem that a sense of peace, belonging, and resolution is the natural result. At the very least, deconversion implies movement away from a religious community. To again draw on Tweed (2006) and the notion of religion as home and boundary, deconversion means packing up and crossing a boundary, not necessarily to “dwell” somewhere else, but to wander, which may or may not be a comfortable experience.

I agree that similar processes are at work in conversion and deconversion/disaffiliation; they do indeed seem to be two sides of the same coin. Like Gooren (2010), I see that “conversion

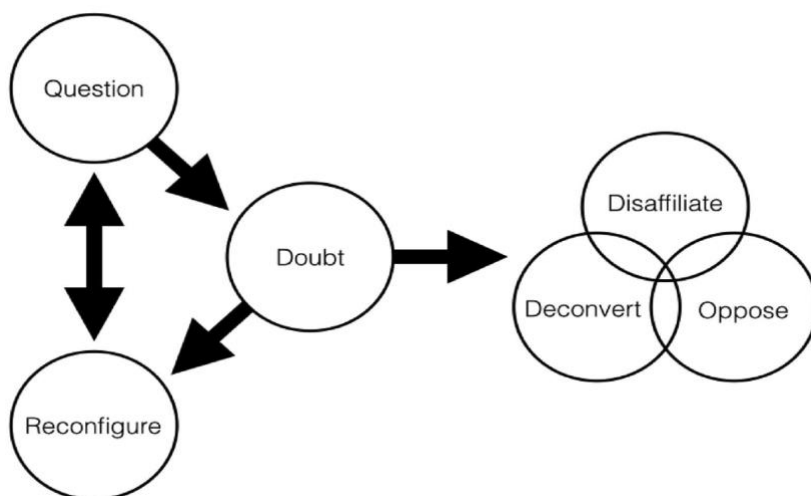
in the narrow sense should always involve a change in religious worldview and hence a change in *identity*” (p. 46). Following Somers, I understand identity as a product of ontological narratives, or “the stories that social actors use to make sense of — indeed, to act in — their lives” (Somers, 1994, p. 618). Conversion, then, involves a radical change in one’s (self-understood) religious, ontological narrative. Deconversion relies on similar processes but denotes a movement away from a religious identity. Most who have gone through such an experience are unlikely to say that they have “converted,” regardless of how some scholars may use the term.

I also propose that it is useful to distinguish between deconversion and disaffiliation. As some scholars have pointed out, one might deconvert but not necessarily disaffiliate, and there are many reasons why someone might choose this route (to retain their clerical employment, for reasons of family harmony, because they enjoy participating in ritual, because they feel connected to the religious community, because they have a strong cultural connection to their religious group, and so on) (Fisher, 2017; Perl & Gray, 2007). Neglected in current formulations of deconversion/disaffiliation is an individual’s subjective perspective on their experience. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis deconversion and disaffiliation have occurred if an individual says they have. Integral to both deconversion and disaffiliation is a self-understanding that one is now different than they have been before. To draw on Tweed (2006), the individual understands that they have crossed a religious boundary and moved somewhere else, wherever that might be. For this thesis, deconversion implies the subjective, inward process of dis-identifying and/or disbelieving, while disaffiliation is the outward act of leaving one’s religious community. Deconversion, then, is one’s understanding of their religious change, and disaffiliation is the community’s understanding of one’s religious change. Deconversion may be achieved privately, but disaffiliation is always public.

Contrary to conversion studies, there are few models that detail a typology of deconversion and/or disaffiliation. As can be seen above, discussions of conversion often trail off at the point where the individual moves towards deconversion and disaffiliation. However, Fisher's (2017) conceptual model of the research on deconversion and disaffiliation presents a useful summary of the research to date.

Figure 1

Fisher's (2017, p. 359) Model of Disaffiliation, Deconversion, and Religious Change



Notably, Fisher is a therapist and presents his findings with implications for clinicians. Fisher (2017) suggests that while a religious person may regularly experience questioning, this does not necessarily turn to doubt. One may simply reconfigure the question or their beliefs in such a way that they feel the issue is resolved. If the questions are too numerous or too serious, doubt may arise. This may prompt further attempts at reconfiguration or may lead to a crisis. This crisis may again lead to more reconfiguration and renegotiation. If these attempts are insufficient, the individual may deconvert, disaffiliate, or oppose. Individuals who oppose are those who, after leaving a religious group, actively work against the organization (and may

sometimes be called “apostates” in the literature). Fisher acknowledges that what might induce someone to move from doubting, to questioning, to reconfiguring is not well understood. Why might some people experience movement towards (to use Fisher’s term) irreligion as a crisis and others not? The model is also quite broad and static, as though the categories are discrete, and the model may lack the nuance to capture individual experiences. Fisher points out that there has been little research on the deconversion/disaffiliation experiences of women, BIPOC people, and other marginalized populations so, at best, the model reflects a very specific group (typically white males). I would suggest that Fisher’s model, while very helpful for summarizing the scholarly work thus far, may best be seen as a first step towards understanding deconversion/disaffiliation and that its usefulness for clinical practice is likely limited.

The limitations noted here are reflective of more significant gaps in the relatively new field of deconversion/disaffiliation studies. While conversion research has begun to centre the importance of relationships in the experience, the same cannot be said for studies of deconversion and disaffiliation. In conversion studies, there is now an acknowledgement that, as Rambo (1993) writes, “All conversions, (even Saul’s on the road to Damascus) are mediated through people, institutions, communities and groups.” (p. 1). Deconversion, on the other hand, is conceived of as a particularly cerebral and decontextualized experience focusing on one’s beliefs. The role that relationships might play is seldom addressed. In addition, conversion/deconversion is typically presented as a binary. As far back as William James, to convert meant to leave one religion (or state of indifference) in favour of something else. Adding new pieces onto old religious structures was not really conversion according to Nock (1933), who termed this manner of supplementing but not substituting “adhesion” (p. 7). This binary is apparent even in Rambo’s (1993) more recent “turning from and to” conceptualization (p. 3).

This either/or perspective may be less useful now than it has been for previous generations. In Ebaugh's (1988) landmark study of role-exists, she notes that while prior generations constructed identities around relatively stable institutions (religions, political parties, nationalities, careers), there seems to be greater role and identity mobility in recent decades. I suspect that, along with this, there is, for younger generations, an increased willingness to hold onto multiple sites of identity (Hemming & Madge, 2011). One may easily imagine a young undergraduate who identifies as a settler in Indigenous territory, of European ancestry, culturally Jewish with Buddhist practices, queer, and fiscally conservative but socially progressive. For younger generations, rapid globalization appears to have resulted not in, as Bourn (2008) explains, "homogeneity and polarisation but rather a creative and eclectic mix of identities" (p. 50). These flexible and adaptable identities might allow for holding diverse perspectives simultaneously in a way that was not considered in early conversion studies (Wachter, Ventriglio, & Bhugra, 2015). Scholars now need to contend with the way that people hold multiple identities at once, which necessarily impacts the way conversion, as well as deconversion, is conceived of.

This chapter has provided a review of the scholarly literature about children in alternative or new religious movements as well as an overview of conversion/deconversion studies. It has shown the deep theoretical divides between those working from a sociological or religious studies perspective and those working from a therapeutic or child welfare perspective. Here, I have suggested that a lack of research from the helping fields has made therapists and social service workers over-reliant on popular media and anecdotal accounts of ARM experiences. Without robust research from professions such as counselling, social work, and child and youth care, there is little guidance for those who engage clients who feel they have been impacted by involvement with alternative religious groups. Similarly, the lack of research on religious

deconversion and disaffiliation can leave even the most well-meaning and well-prepared therapists struggling to provide appropriate supports.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 A Reflexive, Thematic Approach to Narrative Analysis

How do women who have left ARMs narrate their experiences and how might their stories inform practice? The nature of my question and of my data led me to find narrative analysis to be a natural fit for this research. Story is the fundamental unit of human meaning and narrative analysis is the investigation of these stories (Hunter, 2010; Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). Sociologist Arlie Russel Hochschild (2018) speaks of the “deep story” (p. 171). She writes, “A deep story is a feels-as-if story – it’s the story feelings tell in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel.” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 171). Hochschild suggests that trying to understand the deep stories of others gives us the opportunity to explore the subjective prism through which they experience life. Here, I have used narrative analysis to explore the subjective prism of the lives of women who are raised in and then exit ARMs. In essence, I have gone looking for the deep stories of these women’s lives.

Narrative analysis is a broad and complex collection of methodologies (Reissman, 2008). Reissman (2008) explains: “Narrative analysis refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (p. 22). Reissman (2008) further distinguishes between different types of narrative analysis: thematic, structural, dialogic/performance, and visual analysis. While any of these (aside from visual analysis) would be appropriate to this data set, a thematic approach is best suited to the specific research question. Reissman (2008) distinguishes a thematic approach to narrative analysis from other forms of thematic analysis in the following ways: (1) Though the researcher searches for new theoretical insights, previously established theory guides the inquiry, (2) An attempt is made to keep the sequence of a story rather than

separate out codable bits of data (3) An attempt is made to keep the story historically situated rather than looking for universalist interpretations and (4) Thematic narrative analysis is case-centered rather than category centered. A “case,” Riessman (2016) explains, may be “an individual, family, community, group, organization or other unit of social life” (p. 364). Riessman (2005) states that thematic analysis is useful for theorizing across several cases, and from the shared themes that emerge a typology can be created to support a developing theory.

A tension I experienced when crafting my methodology was striking a balance between presenting a generalizable ARM experience while at the same time not losing the granularity and particularity of these women’s stories. As the study by Frisk, Nilsson, and Åkerbäck (2018) concluded, there is so much variety among ARMs and between individual members that it is difficult to put forward a theory of a general, ARM experience. How much, then, could any kind of thematic analysis offer in terms of presenting shared themes to support an emerging typology? This is not only a theoretical, methodological tension, but one with relevance for therapists, and reflecting on my own work as a CYC practitioner helped guide me here. I have encountered a similar tension when working with clients who are facing a challenge like addiction, for example. A balance must be struck between acknowledging the singular uniqueness of the client’s situation while at the same time situating their experience alongside the innumerable others who have faced similar struggles. On the one hand, every situation is indeed unique and must be handled with the curiosity it is due. On the other hand, to treat someone as *only* a unique individual neglects the need for community and the comfort that comes from knowing that others have walked down a similar road. I believe that one of the greatest and most paradoxical comforts in life is knowing that we are at the same time unique and, somehow, just like so many others. As Carl Rogers (2007) put it so eloquently, “What is most personal is most universal,” (p.

26). As I approached these narratives, I tried to take this kind of both/and approach, tugging at the personal and particular to see how it might connect with something more general.

In this thesis, I understand themes to be, as Braun and Clarke (2019) phrased it, "creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves" (p. 596). I take analysis to be the process of making meaning of these themes, a process which is socially constructed rather than "discovered," with the knowledge and insights generated being shaped by my own social and relational context (Gehart, et al, 2007). As with other research grounded in social constructionist theory, I am faced with the question of what validity is if it is not a mirror that reflects back a knowable reality. I must naturally assume that another researcher from another location and orientation may hold up their own mirror in much the same way I have done and yet come to quite different conclusions. In my case, I have worked towards validity by making transparent my own story, theoretical orientation, and research practices in the hope that my findings at least appear, as Kvale (1995) writes, "intrinsically convincing as true, beautiful and good," (p. 38). Similarly, this transparency leaves my research processes and findings open to critique and conversation. In this way, I hope to establish myself and my findings as trustworthy (Golafshani, 2007).

I, as well as the women in this study, represent a group I have termed *alternative religion kids*. As I elaborate elsewhere, alternative religion kids are those who accompany their parents into an alternative religious society where identities are developed in contrast to the predominant, surrounding culture in which they are popularly viewed as outside and other (Pratezina, 2019). Particularly because I share a background similar to the women in this study, a reflexive approach is important here. Braun and Clarke (2019) explain that reflexive thematic analysis

includes theoretical transparency with the researcher attempting to “be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of [thematic analysis] TA; and these are consistently, coherently and transparently enacted throughout the analytic process and reporting of the research (p. 594). Because my theoretical orientation is so closely connected to my experience of being raised in and leaving an ARM, it has been appropriate to say something about who I am and show how this relates to the theoretical underpinnings that inform my work. A reflexive approach allows me to view my subjectivity as a resource rather than a problem to be bracketed aside (Braun & Clarke, 2019). If analysis is a process of making meaning, this meaning is necessarily mediated through me and who I am (Gehart, et al, 2007).

3.2 Selection Criteria

Over the years, my interest in this topic has led me to memoirs written by those exiting religions of all kinds. Six of the books included in this study were part of this larger genre. I located the remaining nine books through a search for memoirs published between 2009 and 2019 and written by those in Canada, The United States, The United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. The authors self-identify as women and also self-identify as being raised in (as opposed to joining) a religious group they understand as an alternative religion. Amazon uses the category of “religious cults” and tracks the popularity of books in this category indicating that these books, at the very least, are viewed as “cult” narratives in a popular or commercial sense. From the search results, memoirs were chosen that meet the above criteria. When multiple books were available representing the same religious group, the most recent publication was chosen. Using this criteria, nine additional memoirs were found suitable for inclusion. After reading all 15 books, the four books indicated in bold were chosen for close analysis.

Table 3

List of ARM exit memoirs

Title	Author	Religious Group	Year
<i>Apocalypse Child: A Life in End Times</i>	Edwards, Flor	Children of God	2018
<i>Fathermothergod: My Journey Out of Christian Science</i>	Greenhouse, Lucia	Christian Science	2012
<i>A River Could be a Tree: A Memoir</i>	Himsel, Angela	Worldwide Church of God	2018
<i>To the Moon and Back: A Childhood Under the Influence</i>	Kohn, Lisa	Unification Church	2018
<i>Cult Child</i>	Kocsis, Vennie	The Move (Sam Fife) (Charismatic Christian)	2015
<i>Beyond Belief: My Secret Life Inside Scientology and my Harrowing Escape</i>	Miscavige Hill, Jenna	Church of Scientology	2013
<i>Unfollow: A Memoir of Loving and Leaving the Westboro Baptist Church</i>	Phelps-Roper, Megan	Westboro Baptist Church	2019
<i>Prophet's Daughter: My Life with Elizabeth Clare Prophet Inside the Church Universal and Triumphant</i>	Prophet, Erin	Church Universal and Triumphant	2009
<i>Leaving the Witness: Exiting a Religion and Finding a Life</i>	Scorah, Amber	Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witness)	2019
<i>In the Days of Rain: A Father, A Daughter, and a Cult</i>	Stott, Rebecca	Exclusive Brethren	2017
<i>Cartwheels in a Sari</i>	Tamm, Jayanti	Followers of Sri Chinmoy (Meditation group)	2009
<i>Daughter of Gloriavale: My Life in a Religious Cult</i>	Tarawa, Lilia	Gloriavale Christian Community	2017
<i>Little Sister: A Memoir</i>	Walsh Chadwick, Patricia	Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary	2019
<i>The Sound of Gravel</i>	Wariner, Ruth	Church of the Firstborn (Mormon fundamentalist)	2017
<i>Synanon Kid: Book One: A Memoir of Growing Up in the Synanon Cult</i>	Wittman, C.A.	Church of Synanon	2017
<i>And</i>			

<i>Synanon Kid: Book Two: A Memoir of Learning to Live Outside the Synanon Cult</i>			2018
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In choosing these four I was looking for specific characteristics. First, I did not want to represent only one type of ARM (e.g., Christian sect, new age, therapeutic, and so on) but to show the great diversity among groups that fall under the ARM umbrella. Second, it became clear that some of the books would be less helpful in addressing my research question: How do women who have left ARMs narrate their experiences and how might their stories inform practice? For example, *The Sound of Gravel* is more thematically concerned with child abuse and poverty. The experience of growing up in an ARM, while not incidental to the story, was also not the primary focus of the book. Related to this, not all of the books contained accounts about life after disaffiliation. The four chosen were helpful in that they each spent a great deal of time on religious themes and the stories included the author's process of leaving and experience of life outside the group. The authors of these four books also struck me as particularly self-aware and seemed to bring a critical eye to their own experience of being raised in an ARM. It appeared to me that they were using the process of writing to sort out their experience as much as to relay it. This led to rich and thoughtful descriptions well suited to analysis.

3.3 Research Methods

Braun and Clarke (2019) suggest that reflexive thematic analysis is not a "recipe" and there is reasonable room for the researcher to adapt the method to suit their purposes. Therefore, I have appropriately adapted their six steps to thematic analysis to fit my narrative approach.

I began by familiarizing myself with the data. I set out to read each of the four selected memoirs once again. I read each one in a day, completing all the books over the course of four

days. As much as possible I wanted each book to be equally present in my mind. As I read, I coded recurring ideas, words, metaphors and patterns within each book. Eventually, it made sense to begin grouping these codes into themes. Some themes were more relevant to answering my research question than others, meaning that I had to judiciously decide what themes would be set aside for the purpose of this study (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Motherhood, for example, was a theme that pervaded not only the four memoirs used in this sample, but nearly all of the 15 books I initially surveyed (not to mention much of women's life writing in general). In one sense, motherhood could be viewed as key to understanding how the next generation of ARM members is socialized. However, a thorough reading of motherhood and its role not only in the stories of women who grow up in ARMs, but in women's life writing more broadly, is beyond the scope of this project.

By the time I had completed this initial reading, identified codes, and began to assemble some initial themes, I was able to see which themes might be common across the accounts. By the point that I had reached the last book, I was aware of themes that had not been apparent to me while reading the first, meaning I then needed to read the books once again. I again read each book in a day, completing the reread in four days. This process left me with some themes that were unique to each book, and a number that seemed to show up across the accounts. I noted where there were outliers but concentrated on commonalities that seemed relevant to my research question. Because one of the hallmarks of *narrative* as opposed to other forms of thematic analysis is preserving the sequence of events, I sequentially displayed themes as they appeared in the stories. This approach led to the development of a model of these women's journeys towards deconversion and disaffiliation. This model is not meant to be a representation

of *all* women's experiences leaving ARMs but is used as a way to show how the themes revealed in the analysis communicate the deep stories I understand these women to be telling.

I have made my theoretical orientation and personal connection to this research plan as a way of showing how theory, as well as positionality, have informed this inquiry. While I have thematically coded segments, I have attempted to preserve the narrative structure of these stories by displaying the themes within a model that preserves the sequence of events. I have coded long segments of text and transcribed long passages in the analysis in an effort to avoid what Kuntz (2015) calls of the "logic of extraction" (p. 32); that is, the cutting up of narrative into codable bits of text that can be organized and quantified, arguing that this removes subjects from their material realities. Similarly, Reissman (2008) notes that category-centered approaches to data analysis "eliminate the sequential and structural features that are hallmarks of narratives." Thus, while a thematic analysis is concerned almost exclusively with the content of narratives, I felt I could not adequately represent these stories and their themes without displaying this content sequentially. Within the analysis, I have also attempted to bring considerable attention to the social context that these stories are told in. In this way, these themes are not ahistorical but particular to the lives and circumstances of these women.

Just as stories are not ahistorical, analysis is not atheoretical. The analytic lens of post-structuralist feminism and deconstruction invites me to read against the tired meta-narrative that paints women and children in ARMs as victims without agency. To do this, I found myself relying on many of the same tools I have used as a CYC practitioner. As I read, I would think with response-based practice and intentionally look for how these women would respond to adversity and work to retain their dignity, emphasizing their capacities and capabilities (Wade, 2015). In this way, as Wade (2015) writes, "Humans are understood as responding agents rather

than affected objects,” (p. 895). Certainly, this agency is enacted within the confines of available discourses, but it is *always* enacted. As Griffith (1997) notes when writing about Evangelical women, agency, and notions of female submission, even within the structures that constrain them, women have always carved out spaces for themselves while also resisting these structures in unexpected, nuanced ways. Griffith (1997) continues:

Older models that analyze conservative forms of religions as intractable bastions of male privilege and female subordination are being supplanted with richer and more complicated frameworks for interpreting female religious activity and women’s power withing organizational bounds (p. 14).

As I read, I looked for ways that these women, even without their own awareness, were moving as active agents within their stories, subverting expectations and challenging stereotypes. This kind of reading seemed particularly important when attending to the stories of “women who escape from cults.” As I detail in the analysis, the discursive practices that contain, confine, and delimit are at work not only within the religious communities that these women were raised in, but in the narrative constraints that are imposed on how these women might tell their stories after leaving.

Here, I was also guided by narrative therapy practices, particularly the practice of looking for exceptions and alternative stories (Morgan, 2000). Thinking with narrative techniques, a practice informed by the deconstructionist thinking of Derrida and Foucault, I read to play with meaning rather than to search for it, especially when it comes to destabilizing taken for granted assumptions about alternative religious experiences (Marsten & Markham, 2017). My reading is an intentional contrast to the way most therapists have approached alternative religious stories, where much of the work has been to search for the universal “signs of cultism” and to uncover

the influences of brainwashing on hapless victims. Working off of a (sometimes literal) checklist (e.g. Lalich & McLaren, 2018; Singer, 2004), it is suggested that one might learn the signs and symptoms of “cults” and recognize, as Singer (2004) phrases it, their “hidden menace in our everyday lives” (p. 1). Taking this essentialist view as a dominant, problem saturated narrative, I dispensed with this checklist thinking and read with an eye to how these authors, behind their own backs, as Caputo (1997) might say, enacted agency, exceptions, and alternatives.

3.4 Reliability and Ethical Considerations

It is the role of the researcher in a narrative study to offer an interpretation of what the story is about. Necessarily, this can go wrong. In qualitative research (or arguably any research) data passes through the researcher as part of the process of interpretation. There is no way to truly “bracket” oneself aside during this process, nor would I want to make this part of my method. Understandably, should some other scholar take up these same books as the subject of research, they might likely come away with a considerably different perspective. My hope is to act reflexively and to make my research process transparent and subject to conversation and critique. As Creswell (2013) writes, “All researchers bring value to a study; but qualitative researchers like to make explicit those values” (p. 18). In making my values, positionality and methodology transparent, I am working towards reliability and trustworthiness.

Dawes (2013) calls storytelling “the most basic work of human empathy” (xiv). The task of working with life-writing is very personal. Certainly, none of these authors wrote these books with the intention that some graduate student might one day make them the subject of a study. In this way, I was very aware that I was subjecting the books to more scrutiny than is perhaps fair. At the same time, I have now spent hundreds of hours “with” these authors and, I must say, I feel a deep kinship with them. As I have written this thesis, I found myself hesitant to write in a way

that might hurt them. I have always imagined that they might one day read this and, while my integrity as a researcher is deeply important to me, it is equally important that I am kind. I have tried to walk a line between bringing a critical and compassionate eye to this analysis. My work comes out of a relational epistemology that “considers subjects as knowers-in-relation-with-others” (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p. 125). Though I do not “know” these authors, I consider myself to be in a relationship with them as a researcher and, further, as a woman with a similar story. I do not treat these stories lightly. I hope that in my relational epistemology, I have engaged with these books in a caring way.

3.5 Limitations

All forms of data come with benefits and drawbacks. This study is not a historical undertaking; rather, it is an attempt to understand the deep stories as told by the authors (Hochschild, 2018). The truth claims presented in these memoirs are not examined for their historical veracity, but for their experiential value, or what Bruner (1991) calls verisimilitude rather than validity. The goal of this project is not to create a representative sample of all those raised in ARMs but to engage deeply with the stories of a few. The majority of scholarly work around ARMs has focused on either sociological theory on the one hand, or quantitative research in psychology on the other, with little attention paid to specific life-histories (Coates, 2012). In this case, soliciting participants through flyers and online forums would have had drawbacks. In previous studies, one of the challenges has been that respondents often represent vocal anti/counter-cult former members and those with strong negative experiences with ARMs. Some who had traumatic experiences with ARMs go on to be “career apostates” (e.g. Carolyn Jessop, 2007), and these stories occupy much of the popular and scholarly discourse. Choosing to work

with memoirs gave some flexibility and allowed me to represent a wider variety of experiences and perspectives.

Because the number of stories included in this study is small, and the genre of life-writing comes with highly specific structural and performative expectations, generalization of these findings needs to be approached with caution. This does not need to preclude the possibility of suggesting theories and directions for future research and therapeutic use, but there is a danger in extrapolating universal principles from a small sample size. These women should not be considered representatives of their religious group of origin. Indeed, I have noted that many books in the “cult memoir” genre are written by those who had a privileged position within their religious group. With the exception of Amber Scolah’s book on leaving the Jehovah’s Witnesses, each of these authors was a part of the inner circle of their groups and, to some extent, had a markedly different experience compared to an “ordinary” member.

This chapter has outlined my approach to reflexive, thematic, narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Reissman, 2008). This methodology was chosen because of its value for use with texts that share a storied form and because it allows me to examine not only the content of these stories, but their narrative shape and position within broader discourse (Reissman, 2008). By reflexive analysis, I mean that I have done my level-best to engage with my own story, including my presuppositions and assumptions, throughout the research process and to make these transparent to the reader. I also acknowledge my close relationship to this topic as a resource that can bring a valuable perspective. I have outlined my method and detailed the process I went through as I worked with the data. Finally, I have acknowledged the strengths and limitations of this study, including the drawbacks and benefits of working with life-writing.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Findings

4.1 Orientation

In order to provide an orientation to these stories, I have included the publisher's synopsis of each of the memoirs. Regardless of how the authors understood the function of their stories, these dust-cover summaries hint at the intended performative purpose of the books as understood by the publishers. Stories may be told for a number of reasons. The stated (or implied) intent of the narrator shapes its telling. While a performative analysis is beyond the scope of this project, it is worth acknowledging that there may be tension and contradiction between what an author hopes their story might accomplish, what a publisher believes a book might achieve in the market, and how a book is taken up in public discourse. Bruner (1991) suggests that narratives function as meaning-making tools for the teller. Stories, however, are not (often) told in a vacuum and function cannot be wholly seen as a personal experience for the narrator so long as the story is shared. Thus, it may be useful to distinguish between the private and public functions of stories. Narratives accomplish here-and-now tasks, taking on different forms in various contexts, which necessarily work dialogically with the teller and audience. My initial reading of the 15 selected memoirs from which this sample has been drawn suggests that some authors hope their books might warn others about the dangers of specific religious groups (or even of religion more generally); some see the process as therapeutic both for themselves and possibly for others like them; and some have social agendas to communicate, such as speaking out against religious and political fundamentalism. These hopes are necessarily constrained by the reality of the marketplace and by a publisher's need to market a story as a product. Noting the dust-cover summaries helps reveal the larger cultural meta-narratives around alternative religions and how it is perceived these books might fit within this cultural discourse.

Cartwheels in a sari: A memoir of growing up cult. Jayanti Tamm (2009).

In this colorful, eye-opening memoir, Jayanti Tamm offers an unforgettable glimpse into the hidden world of growing up “cult” in mainstream America. Through Jayanti’s fascinating story—the first book to chronicle Sri Chinmoy—she unmask a leader who convinces thousands of disciples to follow him, scores of nations to dedicate monuments to him, and throngs of celebrities (Sting, Pope John Paul II, Nelson Mandela) to extol him. When the short, bald man in flowing robes prophesizes Jayanti to be the “Chosen One,” her life is forever entwined with the charismatic guru Sri Chinmoy, who declares himself a living god. A god who performs sit-ups and push-ups in front of thousands as holy ritual, protects himself with a platoon of bodyguards, and bans books, TV, and sex. Jayanti’s unusual and increasingly bizarre childhood is spent shuttling between the ashram in Queens, New York, and her family’s outpost as “Connecticut missionaries.” On the path to enlightenment decreed by Guru, Jayanti scrubs animal cages in his illegal basement zoo, cheerleads as he weight lifts an elephant in her front yard, and trails him around the world as he pursues celebrities such as Princess Diana and Mother Teresa. But, when her need for enlightenment is derailed by her need for boys, Jayanti risks losing everything that she has ever known, including the person that she was ordained to be. With tenderness, insight, and humor, Jayanti explores the triumphs and trauma of an insider who longs to be an outsider, her hard-won decision to finally break free, and the unique challenges she confronts as she builds a new life.¹²

Prophet’s daughter: My life with Elizabeth Clare Prophet inside the Church Universal and Triumphant. Erin Prophet (2009).

¹² Summary retrieved from <https://www.amazon.ca/Cartwheels-Sari-Memoir-Growing-Cult/dp/0307393933>

In early 1990, in response to the apocalyptic prophecies of her mother, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, Erin Prophet entered a network of underground bunkers in Montana along with members of her mother's Church Universal and Triumphant, a controversial New Age sect much of America had branded a "cult." Emerging to find the world intact, Erin was forced into a radical reassessment of everything she knew, or thought she knew, about love, life, and obligations to church and family. She had spent her adolescence watching her mother vilified as a dangerous cult leader even while attempting to meet her mother's expectations by becoming a "prophet" herself. In Prophet's Daughter, the onetime heir apparent of the woman known to tens of thousands of followers as "Guru Ma" provides a fiercely honest account of her struggle to understand a mother who was both loved and hated. Even to her family, Elizabeth Clare Prophet projected an aura of infallibility and held her closest followers to a rigid moral code. With the craft of a storyteller, Erin shows how she first dismissed, then entertained, rumors of her mother's sexual hypocrisy, and suggests that the strain of maintaining a façade of perfection fueled her mother's departure from reality. The taut narrative hangs on an intense combination of health crises and external pressures that drove Guru Ma's increasingly dire prophecies. Throughout the book, Erin also candidly recounts her own journey, the dwindling of her belief, and the turmoil of witnessing her beloved mother's decline. In a moving conclusion, she describes her efforts to combat the subtle corruption brought on by Guru Ma's power and increasing isolation, only to be thwarted by the onset of her mother's Alzheimer's disease. A remarkable memoir, Prophet's Daughter affords a rare look inside the workings of a secretive

sect that once held a nation's attention and still exists today. And it makes a powerful contribution to ongoing public debates about power, group behavior, and the future of religion.¹³

Unfollow: A memoir of loving and leaving the Westboro Baptist Church. Megan Phelps-Roper (2019).

At the age of five, Megan Phelps-Roper began protesting homosexuality and other alleged vices alongside fellow members of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas. Founded by her grandfather and consisting almost entirely of her extended family, the tiny group would gain worldwide notoriety for its pickets at military funerals and celebrations of death and tragedy. As Phelps-Roper grew up, she saw that church members were close companions and accomplished debaters, applying the logic of predestination and the language of the King James Bible to everyday life with aplomb—which, as the church's Twitter spokeswoman, she learned to do with great skill. Soon, however, dialogue on Twitter caused her to begin doubting the church's leaders and message: If humans were sinful and fallible, how could the church itself be so confident about its beliefs? As she digitally jostled with critics, she started to wonder if sometimes they had a point—and then she began exchanging messages with a man who would help change her life. A gripping memoir of escaping extremism and falling in love, Unfollow relates Phelps-Roper's moral awakening, her departure from the church, and how she exchanged the absolutes she grew up with for new forms of warmth and community. Rich with suspense and thoughtful reflection, Phelps-Roper's life story exposes the dangers of black-and-white thinking and the need for true humility in a time of angry polarization.¹⁴

¹³ Summary retrieved from: https://www.amazon.ca/Prophets-Daughter-Elizabeth-Universal-Triumphant/dp/1599219727/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=prophet%27s+daughter&qid=1609178241&s=books&sr=1-2

¹⁴ Summary retrieved from: <https://www.amazon.ca/Unfollow-Memoir-Leaving-Westboro-Baptist/dp/0374275831>

Leaving the witness: Exiting a religion and finding a life. Amber Scorah (2019).

A third-generation Jehovah's Witness, Amber Scorah had devoted her life to sounding God's warning of impending Armageddon. She volunteered to take the message to China, where the preaching she did was illegal and could result in her expulsion or worse. Here, she had some distance from her community for the first time. Immersion in a foreign language and culture-- and a whole new way of thinking--turned her world upside down, and eventually led her to lose all that she had been sure was true. As a proselytizer in Shanghai, using fake names and secret codes to evade the authorities' notice, Scorah discreetly looked for targets in public parks and stores. To support herself, she found work at a Chinese language learning podcast, hiding her real purpose from her coworkers. Now with a creative outlet, getting to know worldly people for the first time, she began to understand that there were other ways of seeing the world and living a fulfilling life. When one of these relationships became an "escape hatch," Scorah's loss of faith culminated in her own personal apocalypse, the only kind of ending possible for a Jehovah's Witness. Shunned by family and friends as an apostate, Scorah was alone in Shanghai and thrown into a world she had only known from the periphery--with no education or support system. A coming of age story of a woman already in her thirties, this unforgettable memoir examines what it's like to start one's life over again with an entirely new identity. It follows Scorah to New York City, where a personal tragedy forces her to look for new ways to find meaning in the absence of religion. With compelling, spare prose, Leaving the Witness traces the bittersweet process of starting over, when everything one's life was built around is gone.¹⁵

¹⁵ Summary retrieved from: https://www.amazon.ca/Leaving-Witness-Exiting-Religion-Finding/dp/0735222541/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=leaving+the+witness&qid=1609178837&s=books&sr=1-1

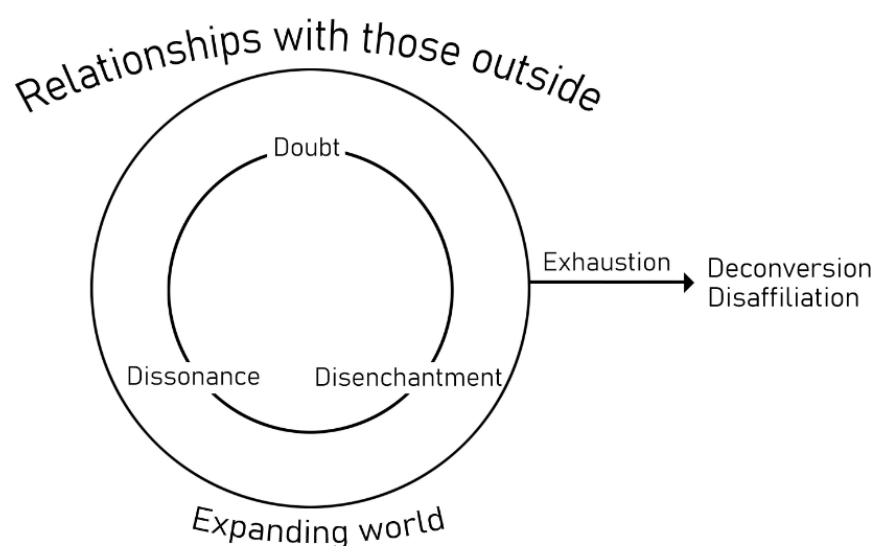
The analysis reveals that, while the women's experiences of leaving their religious groups were varied, general trends are apparent from one account to the next. From these trends, I have assembled a model of disaffiliation and deconversion that describes a protracted process which unfolded over years. In the following section, themes developed in the analysis are organized within the model and then analysed from the perspective of post-structural feminism and deconstructionism with particular attention to how this might inform therapeutic practice.

Broadly, each woman described recurring instances of doubt, dissonance and disenchantment and the tremendous amount of work that went into managing them. This continual work of management, of tension and struggling for resolution, led to exhaustion and, eventually, culminated in their deconversion and disaffiliation. These events are described as happening over a long period of time - often beginning in childhood - with these moments standing out in the narratives in sharp contrast to their otherwise sincere faith and contentment. As long as the women remained largely encapsulated within their religious worlds, they seemed able to resolve specific instances and, for the most part, set them aside. As the cycle of doubt, dissonance, and disenchantment continued, intensified, and intertwined, the constant energy involved in resolving them eventually proved unsustainable. Crucially, and diverging from other models, these destabilizing experiences only led to deconversion and disaffiliation when they occurred within the context of an expanding world and the development of relationships with those outside their religion. I propose that it is not the experiences of doubt, dissonance, and disenchantment *on their own* that provoked exit from their religions, but the exhaustion that came from needing to resolve them again and again. When this exhaustion occurred within the context of access to the wider world and motivating relationships with those outside, deconversion and disaffiliation were the result.

While doubt, dissonance, and disenchantment are presented here as separate categories, they are best understood as deeply entwined, building off one another over a long period of time, with each woman actively working to resolve specific instances as they occurred. This was easier done when the women were young, and their worlds were still small. Erin writes, “In a circumstance where one perceives no options outside of the current scenario, one deals with doubts by filing them away for future reference” (Prophet, 2009, p. 156). Once their worlds began to expand, especially once they expanded to include people on the outside whom they cared about deeply, they became less motivated, or perhaps less able, to sustain the constant process of resolving them. In this context, deconversion and disaffiliation became possible and desirable in a way it had not been before. Figure four (4) provides a visual representation of this model, which is a way of displaying the authors’ journeys through religious exit.

Figure 2

A Model of the Authors’ Journeys Towards Deconversion and Disaffiliation



4.2 Doubt

Doubt occurred when the women were presented with specific information that contradicted their religious doctrines, or when these doctrines simply ceased to make sense in light of new knowledge of the world or new scientific understanding. The women often equate doubting with questioning, especially questioning religious teachings. Predictably, doubts are noted less often in childhood and began to regularly arise as the women grew older and entered situations where they must confront contradiction to their doctrines and worldviews. An expanding world increases the likelihood that one might encounter contradictory information and viewpoints.

Beginning university when she was 15, Erin was careful to note when she learned information that contradicted her mother's teachings, but also writes, "I did not dwell on the doubts, telling myself that my mother had been divinely inspired because her work was humanly impossible," (Prophet, 2009, p. 14). Megan became troubled by inconsistencies in church doctrine and tentatively pursued ways to discuss them with others. In her first recollected awareness of these inconsistencies, she realized the church's call to make homosexuality a capital offence contradicted the passage in the Bible where Jesus states, "He who is without sin among you, let him cast a stone" (John 8:7). Her mother's theological defence of the church's position, which Megan found unconvincing, left her shaken and quietly believing this doctrine to be unscriptural. She found her only recourse was to set this concern aside immediately. When Amber began studying the Bible with people in China, she quickly learned that many of the moral values and teachings she had understood to be unique to Jehovah's Witnesses were reflected in the teachings of Confucius. In addition, some of her Bible students reacted with strong skepticism to the Jehovah's Witness claims. She learned that the timeline of world history

presented in Jehovah's Witness teaching did not fit with the more common, and especially the Chinese, version of history. "A look or a pause would reveal to me that some of the things that I had taken as lifelong truths, things that I had built my life around, seemed just crazy to them. At times I would cringe inside when I noticed that what I said could have been insulting – perhaps even arrogant. The things I taught as universal truths completely disregarded the lived experience of much of the world's population (Scorah, 2019, p. 129). These experiences caused her to question the veracity of church doctrines. Still, "despite my occasional misgivings, I was sure that everything I learned, on the whole, added up, and that was what mattered" (Scorah, 2019, p. 129).

Many of their first experiences of doubt were to observe it occurring for other people and, seeing the negative consequences, vowing never to go down the same road. Jayanti describes how, as a child, hearing the doubts of another disciple inspired her to try harder and be better, lest she become like him. When Megan was a teenager, her older brother, Josh, made a sudden and painful exit from their church and family. After reading Josh's letter describing his grievances and doubts, Megan felt confusion and anger, which she faced with a resolve to remain faithful, "No, I was not like Josh, my heart was fixed. *I will never leave this place*" (emphasis in the original) (Phelps-Ropers, 2019, p. 33). Similarly, Erin and Amber watched as fellow members struggled and eventually made their exits. This was met with concern for the ultimate fate of these defectors, especially when it seemed that life outside the Church Universal and Triumphant did not go well for them. Gregory Mull, a former member who ended up filing a lawsuit against CUT, died from multiple sclerosis shortly after the trial. This was interpreted by Erin, her mother, and her church as divine punishment for his dissent. In a particularly devastating recollection that also highlights her status as a "disciple by default," Amber writes of

a young gay man who had been disfellowshipped from her Jehovah's Witness congregation and later died by suicide. She wrote:

The community needed us to hold up the scaffolding of this world we were a part of, like our parents before us hand, and our grandparents before that, and we had a responsibility to pretend that Dale hanging himself in the woods of UBC was something sad but acceptable. After the meeting, we all went for coffee and talked about Dale, then went home and numbed our feelings, to forget about him and live with ourselves. It was like this with many things" (Scorah, 2019, 245).

As long as the women remained firmly encapsulated in their religious worlds and communities, they had ready access to resources that allowed them to manage specific doubts as they arose. Clearly, as they observed from an early age, the consequences of not doing so could be enormous. Guided by trusted authorities in their communities (parents, elders, pastors) and religious literature that could, at least in some way, relieve these doubts, they were able to dispel them. For Amber, this meant frequently consulting Watchtower literature, which was full of simple answers to seemingly complex problems like, for example, evolution and the origin of the universe. One way the women described managing doubt was to decide that they had simply misunderstood religious teachings. "Guru wasn't at fault – I was for misunderstanding his wisdom" (Tamm, 2009, p. 77). Especially in their childhood accounts, the women wrote of the admiration they had for their parents and other members. When faced with doubt, they seem comforted to know that those who were older and wiser had managed these concerns and this trust in authority was, at least for a time, sufficient to allay their questions. Perhaps they would understand better when they were older. In this way, doubts could be dealt with another day. As Megan wrote, "No matter how much I initially doubted a position taken by the church, their

justifications always made sense eventually” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p.172). As they grew, each began to develop two modes, a religious/spiritual mode and a “worldly” mode. Erin’s mother encouraged this, suggesting she keep a notebook with one side for the professors and one side for God. When Erin encountered troubling and disconfirming facts that might contradict her mother, “I shifted them onto the alternate track, the one in which she [mother] was not always right.” Descriptions of this kind are frequent, and each woman eventually describes coming to a point where, for many reasons in addition to managing doubts, they attempted to live a kind of double life. Thus, doubt was able to co-exist with faith so long as continual work went into keeping their religious/spiritual selves distinct from their worldly self. This approach, however, required constant effort and, for each woman, would eventually prove unsustainable. It would seem that a double life is not a long-term solution to doubt.

Analysis

The culturally accepted meta-narrative positions religious disaffiliation and deconversion as the outcome of a primarily intellectual experience. My survey of the limited academic literature on deconversion and disaffiliation shows the focus is almost exclusively on doubt as the driving force behind religious exit. This “from the neck up” perspective construes religious and spiritual difficulties as brain teasers for the troubled believer to correctly solve. A cursory reading of these memoirs reveals narratives of captive women oppressed by bad religion who became more intelligent and more moral while on the road to embracing the secular. The women seem to find more socially acceptable answers to their religious problems and are appropriately celebrated for this with book deals, speaking engagements, and interviews on popular podcasts and talk-shows. In a way, they enact a “reformed sinner” narrative. At a glance, these books appear to affirm this meta-narrative. However, as my analysis will later unfold, the doubt-based,

intellectual story of disaffiliation and deconversion is a particularly thin narrative and one that, perhaps without their awareness, these women's stories work to unsettle.

Framing individuals', and particularly women's, motivations for leaving their religious groups as primarily intellectual neglects the social and relational contexts of the experience. It is well established that across the Euro-Western world, women tend to be more religious¹⁶ than men (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Trzebiatowska & Bruce, 2012; Zuckerman, 2007). Several theories have been proposed as to why. These theories often operate from the perspective that atheism is the correct or appropriate response to religious questions and the issue of women's higher levels of religiosity is seen as a problem to be corrected. In this way, women are seen as lagging behind men and failing to become secular at a similar rate. For example, it has been suggested that women have a biological or social predisposition towards risk aversion and leaving one's religion brings the threat of eternal damnation and possibly social ostracism – both risky proposals (Edgell, Frost, & Stewart, 2017; Miller & Hoffmann, 1995). Some suggest that women's historic lack of access to education has made them more likely to hold supernatural beliefs (Mahlamäki, 2012). In other words, if women were only braver and more educated then they too might be like men and embrace the secular. According to this formulation, being “religious” is an unfortunate state that some women might find themselves in, especially if they experience social oppression (the poor, the uneducated, and so on). Here, credence is not given to the ways women actively and creatively engage with their religious communities and traditions, subversively using these spaces to enact their own power and voice. This is particularly true for some alternative religions, like Erin's Church Universal and Triumphant,

¹⁶ “More religious” is understood here as suggested by Trzebiatowska & Bruce (2012); women are more likely to report that they pray, worship, and claim their faith is important to them.

many of which have long been active in disrupting established gender norms and hierarchies (and for which they have been regarded with a great deal of social concern and suspicion) (Goodwin, 2018). Even conventionally conservative religious traditions, like Megan's Westboro Baptist Church, are alive with women who are, as Griffith (1997) writes, "perceiving themselves not as blind victims but as clear-sighted dissidents opposing basic elements of the wider culture" (p. 211). This is not to say that religious beliefs, practices, and communities do not function as a tool of patriarchy but portraying them *only* in this simplistic way neglects the lived experience of women who may understand their religious lives to be sites of self-expression and liberation.

For many years now, I have been fascinated with deconversion and disaffiliation stories as they are presented in online atheism forums. Reddit Atheism (referred to as r/atheism), with 2.6 million subscribers, claims to be the largest atheist forum on the Internet.¹⁷ Over the years, I have observed that the vast majority of participants are men and that in sharing their stories of leaving religion they most frequently frame doubt and unresolved questions as the primary reason for their exit. It has seemed to me that in r/atheism there is a correct way to narrate one's religious exit and that is to centre the story on becoming more educated and more intellectually rigorous. r/atheism and similar sites play a significant role in shaping popular discourse about religious exit and delineating the narrative possibilities for delivering one's personal account of deconversion/disaffiliation. One of the primary purposes of sites like r/atheism is to act as a forum to share exit stories and to be affirmed and accepted in doing so. In order to be accepted, those wishing to share stories of leaving their religious groups must engage with this discourse and with the attending narrative expectations. This is true not only for those who share in these kinds of forums, but for those like Megan, Jayanti, Erin and Amber who share their stories

¹⁷ r/atheism can be accessed here: <https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/>

through other forms of mass media. There are cultural expectations for how these stories should go.

The nature of popular discourse about deconversion and disaffiliation is influenced by what is referred to as New Atheism. Rather than a “Can’t we just get along?” attitude, New Atheism is a kind of militant atheism that exists to dismantle religion and “liberate” the naive and captive followers (Amarasingam & Brewster, 2016). The New Atheist community, in which r/atheism is firmly situated, is a male dominated community with notable leaders such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. These four academics/public figures have embraced their title as the “four horsemen” of New Atheism and are frequently referenced and revered on popular atheism forums (Hitchens, et al., 2019).¹⁸ Both popular press and academic work has noted that these kinds of atheist communities are particularly unwelcoming to women and especially hostile towards feminism (Amarasingam & Brewster, 2016; Bianco, 2016; Oppenheimer, 2014). The men who lead these forums seem eager to situate the problem of women’s oppression as a uniquely religious problem rather than the result of longstanding and widespread institutions of patriarchy and oppression in which they themselves may be participating. This hostility towards women may be one factor that keeps women from openly participating in these mainstream atheist communities.

It is worth noting that while here I have made a distinction here between the body and the mind – distinguishing the intellectual from emotional or embodied aspects of an experience - this is largely artificial and done for the sake of convenience. Human beings are not ghosts in machines, but embodied creatures. Particularly in our Euro-Western conceptualization of the self

¹⁸ This is a play on the Biblical image of the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” described in Revelation, Chapter 6.

it is imagined that humans are first and foremost rational beings and that the best reasons for action are rational reasons. This seems to be at work in the way religious exit is conceived of in a popular sense. What my interpretation of these memoirs suggests is that, at least for these women, the experience is much more embodied and much more relational than may generally be supposed.

I do not, however, want to diminish these authors' doubts or downplay the role that this played in their journeys. All expressed deep concern over doctrines they felt they could not understand or justify. A sense of intellectual integrity seemed important to them. I especially do not want to make it appear that intellectual concerns are inherently masculine concerns. I do want to point out that doubt was only one facet of these women's journeys. It is notable that, at the time of the writing of these four memoirs, no author went so far as to declare herself an atheist, or even to reject religion altogether in the way that New Atheism advocates. Once more, these books are often positioned under the banner of anti-religion or atheist stories, yet simultaneously subvert the conventions of the genre. There seems to be something between the doubt/faith binary that the women were intent on exploring. These are not the stories of people who found atheism, but rather the stories of people who left a particular form of religion. Doubt is a significant part of these stories, but it is by no means the most significant.

Reddit Atheism (r/atheism) was one of the first places I landed when I was beginning to question the truth claims I saw presented in the Bible. In doing so, it was easy to get the impression that atheism, at least, the kind that is presented in these online forums, is *the* acceptable answer to all religious and philosophical questions. While cultural messages abound that position atheism as the most enlightened or correct way to be non-religious, with doubt portrayed as the primary pathway away from faith, these women's stories suggest that there is

more than one way to understand religious transitions. Embracing the varieties of these transition experiences may be a liberating prospect to someone who has only been presented with the binary of doubt/faith, religion/atheism.

4.3 Dissonance

Whereas doubts represent intellectual qualms, experiences of dissonance were often described as relational struggles. Dissonance was particularly apparent when a religious figure acted in a contradictory way, or when those they met outside the religious communities seemed reasonable and kind, subverting their expectations for non-members. Further, the women's accounts of dissonance are frequently portrayed as embodied experiences, full of physical descriptions of their discomfort. Since cognitive dissonance describes the unpleasant *feeling* that comes from having conflicting beliefs (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, & Sommers, 2015), it follows that many of these accounts refer to emotions, particularly as they are felt in the body. Cognitive dissonance was, in fact, developed through the study of an apocalyptic religious group. In 1954, Festinger, Riecken and Schachter (2008) noted that in the wake of a failed prophecy about the end of the world, the small group of religious adherents whom they were studying did not necessarily change their religious beliefs in spite of the disconfirming event. Instead, they engaged in elaborate justifications, rewriting the narrative of the event to explain that the group's faithfulness and prayers had averted the apocalypse. What is more, some members engaged in even more rigorous recruiting activities after the failed prophecy, with these behaviours seeming to bolster their beliefs. This is reflected in the women's experiences, where dissonance alone is not a singular pathway to deconversion, but one step among many others on the road.

In these accounts, dissonance is often described when one's religious leader behaves in an unexpected way or fails to live up to expectations. Jayanti writes of her belief that her guru

controlled life and death; no one died without Guru's permission. This belief became incongruent with her experience when her beloved childhood pet rabbit was killed by dogs. "If Guru controlled everything, which I knew he did, why didn't he prevent Munu's death?" (Tamm, 2009, p. 31). Rather than voiding her belief in Guru's omnipotence, Jayanti came to understand that this was a punishment justly brought against her because of her newfound doubts and concerns. In this way, the rabbit's death was not a sign of the limits of Guru's power and the dissonance was resolved. Closer to Jayanti's exit, a member of her religious group died suddenly, an event that surprised and upset her guru. In an experience parallel to the death of her rabbit, she writes, "Realizing that Guru's promise of his occult powers to hold us all safe and secure seemed false, I wondered what else about him might be as well" (Tamm, 2009, p. 217). Erin similarly describes many perceived inconsistencies and possible limitations to her mother's power and guru-status. At times, her mother's prophecies seemed inconsistent or self-serving. During the trial involving Gregory Mull, Erin's distressed mother predicted doom and destruction reaching the entire Earth in an act of retribution. The idea that her mother's personal problems might bring judgement to an entire planet gave Erin momentary pause for concern. "If she thinks that her own personal journey through Revelation affects the entire world, doesn't that make her just like the fundamentalists she criticizes?" (Prophet, 2009, p. 91). Still, while noting that consistency was not her mother's strong suit, Erin was able to justify each instance time and again. Later, the dissonance Erin experienced would reach a boiling point when CUT experienced their own failed prediction of prophecy. By that point, many years later, Erin would find the dissonance harder to resolve. When Megan first became active on Internet message boards as a teenager, she learned troubling information about her grandfather, Fred Phelps, particularly the child and spousal abuse accusations lobbied against him. These accusations made

against her grandfather were especially disconcerting for Megan. In the theology of the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), Fred Phelps was “a star in the right hand of God” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 37) and much of the church’s teachings rested on his status as God’s spokesperson. How could God’s appointed leader act in such a blatantly un-Christian way? Each time she found a conflicting account, Megan went to her mother who vehemently denied the veracity of these accusations. These reassurances allowed Megan to resolve her dissonance. “I took my leave of this line of thought and accepted the shield of my mother’s instruction” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 61). As Megan’s story progressed towards disaffiliation, she reflected on the pain of holding “Two diametrically opposed positions, held strongly and sincerely by the same mind at the same time” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 162), writing that this made her feel “deranged”; like she was in a “waking nightmare” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p.162-163). While the Jehovah’s Witnesses do not have a similar living guru or prophet, Amber experienced dissonance when she felt she was called to act in a contradictory way. Particularly after she disaffiliated and was able to reflect back, Amber became more aware of times she felt Jehovah’s Witness doctrine asked her to behave in ways she felt were wrong. “Doing wrong for the sake of right, like some chemical in the brain, can block pain, let us live with it. Ideology makes us do terrible things and believe they are right” (Scorah, 2019, p. 242). The teachings of the one, true church must be infallible and, if they feel wrong, this is a problem with one’s feelings and not church doctrine.

Descriptions of dissonance are written about in a particularly visceral way. Whereas doubts may be cognitively disconcerting, in these accounts, dissonance is written of as living more in the body. Jayanti writes of an upsetting childhood experience of dissonance when her guru, Sri Chinmoy, suggests that his followers kill a troublesome member. Jayanti writes, “What I heard Guru say felt wrong. Unsettled and with my stomach throbbing with discomfort, I turned

to my mother” (Tamm, 2009, p. 72). In her exit from WBC, Megan was accompanied by her younger sister, Grace. Together, they secretly shared their deep concerns about the church, and about what they were being asked to do for the sake of the church. The dissonance of behaving in a way that contradicted their new moral values made picketing viscerally uncomfortable for the sisters and weighed heavily on their consciences. Megan describes her sister anxiously picking the skin around her fingernails until they bled and festered for weeks on end, an outward sign of their inward distress. In another instance, Megan writes of the inner conflict she experienced when she was briefly attracted to a young Jewish man. His disarming kindness, charm, and intelligence seemed to contradict what she had been taught about Jews and her sexual interest in him seemed to contradict what she had been taught about chastity. In what she described as a moment of weakness and temptation, she visited him in his apartment. “The tiny spark of excitement that shot through me was more than dwarfed by an overwhelming sense of foreboding and dread; I felt physically ill,” and “The corrosive acid in my stomach seeming to multiply with each step until I thought I would vomit” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 113). Embodied dissonance also appeared when the body betrayed a lack of appropriate response; in feeling disgusted when others are pleased, for example. Erin wrote of her feelings of disappointment and confusion when she did not seem to be falling in love with the marriage partner her mother had, essentially, chosen for her. Her lack of physical response to his kiss worried her, but he was her sanctioned partner, so she reassured herself that it would, eventually improve. Sometimes, this dissonance stemmed from a feeling of pleasure that was difficult to reconcile with religious teachings. As Jayanti began a relationship with a young man outside her group, she reflected on the discomfort this pleasure caused, “How was this un-divine when it felt absolutely celestial?” (Tamm, 2009, p. 161). In describing the beginnings of an online correspondence with her love

interest, Amber wrote, “If I noticed my heart would lift along with the three-note scale that sounded with the pop-up on my screen each morning around 10:00 a.m., I ignored it, like I had ignored my heart for years. A religious person learns to live with a divided heart, one that does not acknowledge what it does not want to admit to itself” (Scorah, 2019, p. 143). The dissonance of a divided heart, of trying to hold onto and reconcile conflicting beliefs and experiences, would contribute to each woman feeling that life inside their religious community was more than they could bear.

Analysis

Because doubt is so often the catch-all word used to summarize religious discontent, other ways of experiencing religious and spiritual problems may be under-acknowledged. Over the years I have spoken to countless individuals who describe going through faith transitions of some kind. The most common reason given for their religious exit is because they no longer believe; that is, they no longer accept certain intellectual propositions as true and are, thereby, disqualified from having a place in their religious community. They have doubts. But in probing their stories further, I nearly always discover that there were other factors at work. These other factors may not be acknowledged by the individual as they go through or reflect back on a religious transition. Intentionally including dissonance in conversations about faith transitions provides validation for other ways of knowing and opens up possibilities for telling stories in a new way. Doubts are certainly troubling, but the route to reassurance is fairly straightforward. There are books to read and more experienced members to talk to. One might set aside doubts to be sorted out another day. This is not so easily done with dissonance. Because dissonance was so often described in these stories as relational and written of in such physical terms, it is harder to ignore.

In reading Amber's phrase "a divided heart" I found myself thinking of a broken heart and how closely the two images are linked. Broken-hearted aptly describes these women's experiences of relational dissonance. To learn one's mother is not able to predict the future, that one's guru does not control life and death, or that one's beloved grandfather has been an abusive father and partner is indeed heartbreaking. To begin to see one's heroes as fallible humans is certainly painful though it is by no means unique to growing up in an ARM. For these women, however, who were a part of religious groups with very clear expectations and very clear understandings of what it meant to be "in" and "out," the consequences of this change in perception were quite significant. Everyone's grandfather is not a saint, true, but everyone's grandfather does not also hold the key to their eternal salvation.

The four women described feeling that their emotions were given little credence and, indeed, were sometimes seen as antithetical to their religious and spiritual journeys. They write of how they were taught to be distrustful of their emotions, which they were told might lead them off the right path. As Megan wrote, her mother (and indeed, my own mother) would often tell her, "The heart is deceitful above all things" (Jerimiah 17:9). To come to a renewed place where one can approach their emotions and body with trust is a more integrated way to be.

Dissonance was particularly connected with sexuality in these stories. While not all ARMs are sexually restrictive – far from it – the four religious groups represented here exercised strict control over members' (and particularly girls' and women's) sexuality. I have found that a common narrative convention both in these books and in religious exit memoirs more broadly is to begin the story by establishing the author's sincerity of her former beliefs, later juxtaposing this against the crisis of faith that followed. In these four books, the pinnacle of this sincerity was represented by sexual purity through both abstinence before heterosexual marriage and/or a

restrained and controlled sex life after. Though these stringent expectations were not unique to the women in these groups, they were at times enacted in/on women's bodies in ways that they were not for men. For women especially, sexual purity extended beyond specific behaviours to include thoughts, desires, and ways of being (e.g., the clothing that is worn, the way a woman walks, and so on). In these women's stories, sexual purity was positioned as the primary symbol of their faith and devotion, and to lose it or to compromise it was understood as the ultimate sin. Indeed, for each one, breaching sexual boundaries was the denouement of their exits; the turning point from which there was no going back.

Because each woman's sincerity and devotion to her beliefs was linked so closely to her commitment to sexual purity, moments in the stories where sexual desire came through caused a sense of shock, both for me as the reader and, so it would seem, to the women themselves. These sexual desires caused a troubling dissonance where their bodies seemed to betray them with forbidden longings. The few passages that are even vaguely sexual seem to be written with an unusual hesitancy not matched in the rest of the narratives. This may be because of a more general (and understandable) reservation about publicly discussing one's sex life, but my sense has been that, even when talking about fleeting moments of sexual desire from years gone by, there remains a shame, even a confusion. Attempting to hold onto these competing desires; for holiness achieved through purity on the one hand and sexual longing on the other, created a powerful experience of dissonance.

The role that sexual longing played in these stories is a far cry from the doubt-based, intellectually focused narrative that often stereotypes religious exit. In part, I suspect that these authors' attempts to slide in talk of sexuality alongside other more "worthy" and acceptable reasons for their exits is a way to counter a common narrative of religious exit put forward in

some religious communities. I have not been able to find literature on religious community's perceptions of those who disaffiliate, so here I must speculate based on my own experience. Over many years of listening to the exit-stories of friends and acquaintances, those who exit often worry they will be perceived as leaving because they "wanted to sin." The discourse of religious exit as understood by some religious communities – and, I suspect, by the communities represented here – is that many leave the fold in order to pursue forbidden behaviours. As I noted the hesitancy that sexuality is handled with, I felt the authors were crafting their stories to ensure that it was clear that this was not the case. It seemed important that they made it clear that their leaving was for purposes of integrity and not for purposes of indulgence. Thus, the stories are told in a way that establishes the author's sincerity, especially through sexual purity. While it seems that the line between "good" reasons for leaving and "indulgent" reasons for leaving is more blurred than the authors may be aware of, their exits are at least narratively construed as a difficult and painful step they *had* to make in order to maintain integrity, not a move they *wanted* to make in order to indulge in forbidden behaviours.

4.4 Disenchantment

Especially as they became older and their lives broadened outside their religious communities, the women's stories focussed increasingly on disenchantment. While telling the stories of their early lives, the women described a romance with their religious traditions, and, in the case of Erin, Megan, and Jayanti, a romance with their religious leaders, especially. For these three, the idea that their beloved leaders might commune directly with ascended masters, God, or a higher spiritual realm was a source of comfort and wonder. For all four, being a part of a select group that had access to these leaders, communities, and teachings gave them a sense of specialness, of being set apart and called to sacredness. This made their eventual disenchantment

particularly painful; less like realizing an intellectual error and more like falling out of love.

These instances of having “seen behind the curtain” were most pronounced near the end of their religious journeys. The women note hypocrisy among leaders and other members that dissuaded them from believing their group was specially guided by God, frustration with rules and restrictions, and an increased awareness of their own unhappiness coupled with longing for a more independent, satisfying life outside.

Megan’s initial disenchantment coincided with organizational shifts in church leadership, when a new group of even more conservative elders staged a takeover. Misguided though she now finds WBC to be, as a young person she found church leaders to be largely consistent and approachable. The new elders, however, doctored photographs and encouraged Megan to lie about church activities. New, stringent rules seemed unevenly applied and favouritism became apparent. She became uncomfortable picketing and sensed hypocrisy in the signs she held. For example, why did God’s eternal forgiveness not extend to homosexuals? A close family member in the church was excommunicated despite their apparent, sincere repentance. Reflecting back after she left and encountered others who had undergone similar exits from religious groups Megan wrote, “I noticed this pattern again and again: an ‘unshakable faith’ first called into question by the group’s failure to live up to its own standards” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 268). Because both Jayanti and Erin lived so closely with their gurus, they were especially privy to hypocrisy in their lifestyles, which, over long periods of time, contributed to their disenchantment; their gurus seeming just as much driven by their own lusts and longings as by spirituality. Erin recounts the devastating blow of learning that her mother, who held restrictive views on sexuality, had had extra-marital affairs. This was especially difficult to learn as her mother had curtailed and controlled much of Erin’s meager sex life. Erin also notes being

troubled by the impoverished conditions in which members lived while her mother lived in (comparative) comfort. Jayanti recounts many instances of unsettling hypocrisy in Guru Sri Chinmoy, for example, banning members from owning pets only to then begin collecting exotic animals himself. Amber, too, began to see the sometimes changing and inconsistent teachings of the Jehovah's Witness doctrine as more the work of fallible humans rather than divine revelation. These experiences had a way of shifting the women's perceptions of their religious teachings and especially their leaders off their pedestals. As Erin put it, "Now her [mother's] own halo was askew" (Prophet, 2009, p. 249).

A key part of disenchantment was coming to feel that rules and restrictions that had once seemed acceptable no longer fit. In the Western Baptist Church, Megan writes of an awkward moment when, at age 25, she needed to receive her brother's approval of an outfit to ensure it met new modesty standards. In the Church Universal and Triumphant, Erin's frustrations with sexual restrictions simmered quietly for years, and her battles with her own sexual desire, as well as the rigid sexual restrictions more generally, played a role in her exit. "I was beginning to conclude that declaring sexual acts like homosexuality to be 'misuse of sacred fire' was as misguided as attempting to omit the 'sensual' colors red or orange from our lives" (Prophet, 2009, p. 250). As Erin became more disenchanted, she would also shrug off restrictions around alcohol, rock music, clothing, and literature. Jayanti struggled to deal with the restrictions placed on her while attending a private, girls' high school and noted how her guru's tight control over her activities kept her isolated from her peers. She vacillated between devotion to her guru's teachings and wishing to go to parties and experiment in ways that mimicked her peers. Later, as a romance blossomed between her and a young man outside her group, Jayanti would try to relieve some of this strain by keeping this relationship and her sexual experimentation secret.

Disenchantment and secret romance go hand in hand for the women, and growing frustration with sexual restrictions had a role in each woman's exit.

As doubts and dissonance built up, disenchantment increased, intensifying towards exit. Each woman longed for a life outside, free of rigid rules and constant monitoring or, somewhat paradoxically, reform in their religious groups that would relieve their concerns. However, at the same time, the prospect of leaving seemed too painful. This forced each woman into a double bind; miserable at the thought of staying in and miserable at the thought of leaving. Megan writes, "Grace pointed out that although leaving was unthinkable, despair awaited us no matter which option we chose" (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 179). Near the end, the women all described intense unhappiness and a feeling of being trapped. Their religions simply stopped working for them. They were utterly disenchanted. Amber wrote:

Months passed like this, in a holding pattern. I went to meetings. I went on my Bible studies, I tried to preach, I did what I had always done, but I felt like a hypocrite. I had doubts. But if I didn't believe my life would be over, and everything would be gone. I was paralyzed, because there was no answer to this problem. The stakes were too high to do anything. (Scorah, 2019, p. 171).

Each imagined what a life outside might look like. These longings for relatively mundane things – an apartment to oneself, a job, financial independence, managing their own time, choosing their own clothes and music, exploring sexuality – seemed to fill them more with sadness than with hope. The feeling of being trapped made these seem unattainable. Jayanti poignantly wrote, "On the day of my twenty-fourth birthday, while most of my contemporaries in the outside world were finishing graduate school, getting engaged, buying apartments, eagerly embarking on life's possibilities, I realized I had already died (Tamm, 2009, p. 259). The

unhappiness, distress, depression, and feeling there was no way out brought both Erin and Jayanti to thoughts of suicide. After a failed suicide attempt at home, Jayanti stood on the edge of a subway platform until a perceptive stranger pulled her back. “I didn’t know if I had such a thing as my own will, but I did know that I still had control over my own body, and for the first and last time, I was going to use it, (Tamm, 2009, p. 271). Erin wrote, “I began to be overwhelmed by disturbing thoughts and bouts of unexplained tears. Not once but many times, after I dropped my boys at their school at the East Gate trailer park near the Corwin Springs bridge, I thought about driving my Suburban into the Yellowstone River and breathing the icy water” (Prophet, 2009, p. 244).

Rather than coming to a place where they had logically and satisfactorily determined that their beliefs were untrue, disenchantment pervaded their experience until each came to a place where they no longer cared if it was true. Of reading a particularly challenging story in the Bible, Megan wrote, “It wasn’t that I didn’t believe it. It was that every part of the story disgusted me, from God all the way down” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 175). Now, with halos askew all around, they found their religious texts to be one among many, their revered leaders to be struggling and fallible human beings, and the religious communities they once felt to be the centre of the universe to be contrived and narrow. In the final pages of her book, Jayanti wrote of watching her guru and his followers skip around the room, talking in baby-talk in an effort to connect with their inner-child. “Their desperate tenacity felt sad, and the idea of joining or even supporting them repelled me” (Tamm, 2009, p. 264). For each one, the sparkle and magic was gone from their religious lives.

Analysis

Within disenchantment, there is a sense that the women had outgrown their religious groups and began to bristle against many of the rules and expectations. If their early stories were filled with enchantment, of being in love with their religious traditions and communities, the women, as might be expected, showed how willing they were to go to great lengths to please their beloved. For each of them, this entailed sacrifice, including the sacrifice of their hopes for the future (e.g. attending college) and for pursuing sexual experiences. Early on, there was a romanticization of these sacrifices and of sexual sacrifice in particular. Being poor, or ostracized, or persecuted, or destined to remain celibate (as in the case of Megan, who had no marriage prospects within the limited pool of Westboro, and Jayanti who was part of a group that saw all sexual behaviour as “unspiritual”) was only a sign of their great love and devotion. But, like someone who is thrilled to pick up after her lover when they first move in together, time has a way of removing the rose-colored glasses that accompany new love. Periods of disenchantment in particular were marked by a frustration with being kept childlike long past when the women felt it was appropriate. Levine (1984; 2012) has suggested that those who *join* ARMs do so because they feel stalled in their personal growth into adulthood and, for a variety of reasons, feel unable to feel a sense of optimism and enthusiasm for their futures in the world. In quite the same way, the women in these accounts had similar feelings, but towards their future in their religious worlds. This, it seems was instrumental in prompting their *exit* from ARMs. In one sense or another, they were kept childlike and began to feel like they needed to leave in order to grow up.

This experience of infantilization continued even after their exits. Once they left their communities, they became keenly aware of the ways they were out of sync with their peers and felt a need to catch up in order to mature. This concept of the stunted former ARM member is

also present in the therapeutic literature. One of the approaches to therapeutic work with people who have left ARMs is to focus on the development of critical thinking skills (Dubrow-Marshall & Dubrow-Marshall, 2018). It is sometimes assumed that being raised in or involved with an ARM dulls the mind and the ability to reason for oneself. Losing the ability to think for oneself is seen as a hallmark of “brainwashing,” itself a patriarchal concept. In this way, the therapist or helper ends up reaffirming a narrow, stereotypical message, confirming that the former member is indeed incapable of thinking for themselves and requires specialized education or interventions in order to mature. Or, to use Szimhart’s (2018) dehumanizing metaphor, the therapist’s job when working with ARM members is to “show the fly the way out of the bottle,” (p. 96). In this way, the infantilization of former ARM members may continue even in the therapist’s office.

Looking within these memoirs for exceptions to the “brainwashed cult-child” trope reveals the remarkable responses of these women to their infantilization, oppression, and confinement. Each was quite capably able to enact resistance, not to mention apply critical thinking skills, within their own circumstances in order to keep themselves and very often the others around them safe, particularly during difficult periods. Erin, in what was surely a monumental task, stepped in to mediate between her secretly ailing mother and a congregation of devotees who looked to her for leadership and guidance. In doing so, and in continuing to do so long after her own beliefs had shifted, Erin protected vulnerable members and kept a difficult situation from being much worse. In addition, and while only in her 20s, she oversaw the construction of one of the largest nuclear fall-out shelters in the world, a task that, no doubt, required quite a bit of skill and savvy. Megan similarly remained in Westboro Baptist Church after she began to understand it as a dangerous and problematic group not because she was brainwashed, but because she hoped to use her influence to make positive changes that might

protect others. Jayanti was wisely able to create distance between herself and her guru by travelling to Europe to participate in group-sanctioned activities while, at the same time, gaining the opportunity to explore much of the continent on her own. As Amber began to feel more troubled by life as a Witness, she found ways to expand her skills, generate income and, in doing so, launch a successful podcast, all while living in a new country and while still learning the language.

These are not the stories of hapless flies trapped in bottles awaiting rescue. They are the stories of adventurous, intelligent women. It is no surprise that they ended up deeply disenchanted as they outgrew the confines of their religious groups. But rather than being an indication that they were the passive victims of brainwashing, it demonstrates that they were growing, changing, and developing beyond the constructs and discourses available to them within their religious groups.

This is not to say, however, that one can live a discourse-free life. In stepping out of one narrative, we necessarily step into others. None of us lives in a vacuum and our choice of which discourses we might embody is delineated by the societies and cultures we are a part of. The particular ARMs represented here offered tightly bounded, all-encompassing ontological narratives. If, returning to Somers (1994), ontological narratives are the stories that we use to make sense of and act in our lives, we might understand that these women experienced a period of narrative transition upon leaving their religious groups. This may make it difficult to know who one is and where one should go next. It is not difficult to imagine how these women and others like them might be compelled to step into a new and ready-made narrative in order to fill that void. This is where the brainwashing narrative and anti-cult discourse becomes alluring and can offer a new narrative home for former ARM members.

In these memoirs, each woman engages differently with anti-cult discourse and the anti-cult movement. Jayanti makes passing references to those who protested her guru and accused him of leading a “cult.” In addition, the word “cult” appears in the title, a clear marker of how Jayanti now understands her experience. Anti-cult discourse, however, is not framed in the narrative as having a role in her exit. She did not have what I refer to as a “cult awakening” where she realized she was a part of an unpopular and perhaps dangerous religious group. It seems it is only in retrospect that she acquired anti-cult language that at times crops up in her writing. Similarly, Megan references how reporters and other outsiders understood WBC to be a “cultic” group, linking them, at least theoretically if not theologically, to groups like the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas. Here, however, Jayanti and Megan’s overt engagement with anti-cult discourse ends.¹⁹

Erin’s story of leaving the Church Universal and Triumphant and Amber’s story of leaving the Jehovah’s Witnesses present an interesting juxtaposition. More than any of the other books, Amber writes about the way anti-cult discourse was a part of her exit. Her romantic partner, with whom she began clandestinely chatting while they were still an ocean apart and who she cites as instrumental to her exit, drew heavily on anti-cult rhetoric in their conversations as he persuaded her to see her religious group as not only misguided but dangerous, using sophisticated tricks of influence and control to keep her bound to the organization. After leaving, Amber writes of seeking out and being comforted by anti-cult content. In this way, she was able to step from one sturdy narrative – that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses – into another – that of the anti-cultists.

¹⁹ In the years following her book, Jayanti, who is now an English professor, went on to publish popular anti-cult writings. See for example *What is a cult? Recognizing and avoiding unhealthy groups* (retrieved from: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-c-word_2_b_848340)

Erin writes of being very aware of anti-cult activists and their actions against CUT and her book actively opposes these efforts and offers a counter-narrative to them. Erin portrays CUT as a diverse group of well-meaning though sometimes misguided individuals who came together to form a community around her guru-mother. A complex dance between agency and authority ensued, with church members on the one hand and her mother, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, on the other continually reinforcing one another in their roles as students and leader. Here, Erin walks a fine line between justifying some of the more harmful activities of CUT (e.g. the financial ruin some members experienced after investing all they had into building the fall-out shelters; the strained relationships that resulted from arranged marriages, and so on) and presenting a richer portrait of life in the community than is acknowledged by anti-cult rhetoric and the media. This is particularly apparent as Erin writes of the Gregory Mull trial. Mull and his lawyers accused CUT and Erin's mother in particular of using manipulative mind-control techniques that ultimately led to Mull's financial and even physical demise. Renowned psychologist, Margaret Singer, who is still perhaps the most significant voice among brainwashing proponents, acted as an expert witness in the trial.

In some ways, Erin's book functions as, if not a justification of the Church Universal and Triumphant, then at least an alternative explanation for how things came to play out as they did. In doing this, the reader can see how Erin works hard to avoid falling into the trappings of most "cult memoirs." She presents arguments against brainwashing, writes of other members as having agency and voice in their lives, and tries to avoid a black-and-white presentation of what is, in the end, a complicated and multi-faceted experience. At the same time, she acknowledges the vulnerable position of many members and the suffering they endured, and grapples with her own role in relaying prophecies and upholding teachings that were not only harmful but at times

devastating. In refusing to strike the predictable “cult memoir” beats that readers may come to expect, Erin’s book is at times uncomfortable because it defies these expectations. Of all the books, Erin’s is the most overtly aware of popular and scholarly discourse around ARMs.

4.5 Deconversion and Disaffiliation

Though these instances of doubt, dissonance, and disenchantment were present at different points throughout the course of their lives, they did not culminate in deconversion/disaffiliation until they occurred in the context of a wider experience of the world. Sometimes these experiences outside their communities allowed the women to see what they might be missing, especially as they compared their lives to that of their new peers on the outside. Often, these new experiences put their religious teachings in stark relief, making them seem odd, insufficient, or even ridiculous. An expanding world came with a sense of freedom and control over their own life, activities, and time. With the exception of Erin, for whom restrictions and obligations as a leader in her group kept her outside interactions extremely limited, all of the women made their first forays into the wider world in order to engage in religiously sanctioned activities. For these three women, this meant having a valid excuse to venture out into areas of life that had previously been cut off for them. One of the unintended consequences of wandering into uncharted territory was that the rules that had guided their lives to that point were not easily able to follow. This provided a certain amount of latitude and liberation. These experiences in the wider world seemed to have a grounding effect, preparing the women for their ultimate exits.

The Context of Deconversion and Disaffiliation

Jayanti was sent to work as a secretary at the United Nations in order to further some of her guru’s plans. This work was carried out undercover; she was instructed to blend in, not to

wear her usual sari, and not to reveal herself as a follower of Sri Chinmoy. Eventually, she was sent to France to live with other followers, further broadening her world, giving her more time to herself, and more time without being monitored.

Though I always stayed with disciples, I didn't have any set schedule or timetable. If I wanted to work at a divine-enterprise I could, and if I wanted to head off to another city, I could do that as well. Armed with a Eurorail pass, I was free to decide where I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. Not having to be at the tennis court or a meditation, the pressures of Guru's tight grasp loosened and dropped. For the first time in my life, I was in charge" (Tamm, 2009, p. 189).

While Jayanti's guru initially kept her from university, he eventually agreed to let her take some journalism classes. By now, Jayanti was deeply invested in living a divided life. "I inhabited the best of both worlds: I had friends, college, fun, and a boyfriend, while simultaneously...could even still inch towards God-realization" (Tamm, 2009, p. 230). As with all the women's attempts to live two lives, her success was short-lived. After her guru received numerous reports of her indiscretions, she was temporarily expelled from the group, but opted to return a few months later. Still, taking these journalism classes unsupervised and on her own, though brief, was a pivotal experience for her.

Amber elected to go to China as a pioneer (the Jehovah's Witness term for missionary), where she too was undercover, needing to uncharacteristically blend in and assimilate due to the Chinese prohibition of the Jehovah Witness religion. Amber wrote, "I felt like a teenager again, with very little responsibility and a lot of time to explore, my only accountability a number reflecting the hours I had spent doing this filled out on a form" (Scorah, 2019, p. 100). Whereas, previously, in her pioneer work in Canada, Amber was careful not to make friends outside her

Jehovah's Witness community, here she was specifically instructed to spend long periods getting to know her Chinese neighbours before ever bringing up the Bible. To facilitate this, she worked as an English tutor, meeting many people, some of whom would become her Bible students, and learning about their lives, beliefs, and culture. Living in China for many years meant that Amber became well-versed in Mandarin. Learning a new language was liberating in its own way and this, combined with the radically different culture, provoked her to rethink much of what she had taken for granted. "It was a different way of being in the world. I was in a mild state of disorientation for a number of years, and one of the unexpected effects was that I was slowly made a little less sure that the world was in fact as I had always thought it was" (Scorah, 2019, p. 125). Amber's world would expand further when, needing money, she took a job working on a podcast that taught foreigners Chinese. The podcast was a hit, and Amber ended up as the host of a popular segment of the show. While she kept her Jehovah's Witness identity a secret and was careful not to socialize too much with her colleagues, the experience of worldly success was empowering for her, laying the groundwork for her eventual exit.

Though Megan completed university, like the rest of her highly educated family, this was still a relatively cloistered experience for her. Megan reflects little on her time at university, aside from noting some troubling realizations after taking an introductory logic course, and she continued to live at home with her family. It was not until she became active on Twitter, as the spokesperson for Westboro, that she really began to engage with the outside world. As with Amber and Jayanti, she was entering uncharted terrain, and the rules she had lived by thus far no longer seemed to apply. Though many of Megan's thousands of Twitter followers treated her and her provocative, frequently homophobic messages with hostility, there were enough who reached out in kindness and curiosity that she began to think of them in a friendly way. "Though I

angered them on a regular basis, I had a growing sense of community with the people I encountered there” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 140). Twitter became a relatively safe, church-approved way to explore ideas, hear from others, and even make friends with those outside. “Instead of booting me from the platform for ‘hate speech,’ as many had demanded, it [Twitter] had put me in conversation with people and ideas that effectively challenged beliefs that had been hammered into me since I was a child – and that conversation had been far more illuminating than decades’ worth of rage, isolation and efforts to shame and silence (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 260).

Erin, who was only 15 when she began university, also lived with family or with other Church Universal and Triumphant members during this time. Like Megan, this was a largely uninspiring time in her life, and this brief visit into the wider world was not enough to dissuade her from her religious commitments. Her mother allowed her to briefly live in the dorms where she made friends, went to parties and even shared a kiss with a classmate. Still, she wrote, “Although I had enjoyed making friends and going to parties, I also had a strong allegiance to my home, the greater family of church members, and my parents’ work and reputation” (Prophet, 2009, p. 76). Whereas the other women found ways to participate in approved activities in the world which gave them an increased sense of freedom and control, Erin’s public role as her mother’s right-hand and a prophet-in-training meant that expectations for her were perhaps higher or, at least, she was more closely scrutinized than the other three women. As a co-leader in her church, there was an added layer of difficulty to experiencing life outside her religious community. She also felt partially responsible for the prophecies that led to the difficult situation the church eventually found itself in, and felt she had a duty to stay and make things right. After CUT’s failed prophecies, Erin continued as a leader, living in the community and working for

the church and her mother. Even so, these were a turning point for her, and she notes that they were the beginning of her exit. Unlike Amber, who began her disaffiliation process while her husband was still a firmly committed Jehovah's Witness, Erin found her husband as disenchanted as she was. Though they continued living on site, they had the support that came from being like-minded, and were able to put up boundaries between their religious life and their newfound interest in things outside the Church Universal and Triumphant. This meant that Erin could remain connected and active in CUT while also experiencing a measure of freedom which enabled some exploration of the outside world. Both she and her husband found this new control over their own lives to be liberating (to a point), allowing them to experiment and grow in the directions they chose. Together, they took tentative steps into sexual experimentation, rock-music, and trips out to a local bar. In this way, their experience of the world increased, providing a prelude to both of their eventual exits.

Each woman's exit was supported and inspired by what I term "motivating relationships." The women developed close, trusting and meaningful friendships with a person outside their religious community. While this theme of motivating relationships need not be romantic, it certainly was for these four women. Motivating relationships serve several functions. Each woman was very aware that their religious group was viewed as odd (at the very least) and having contact with someone who cared for them in spite of this was not only touching but allowed them to see themselves as separate from their groups. These relationships also created a safe space to explore feelings and desires, and, for all but Jayanti, have challenging theological and philosophical conversations. Especially for Megan and Amber, their outside romantic partners offered challenges to their religious beliefs, but not ultimatums. The love and care they received was not contingent on them changing their religious positions. At times, these

relationships helped the women see that those outside could be kind, understanding, and good. Because, in each case, the relationship was prohibited by their religious teachings, the women were sometimes motivated to leave, or at least live a double life, in order to be with their secret loves. On their own, however, the relationships were not enough to facilitate the women's exits. While the relationships provided inspiration and challenge, none of the four women left simply for the sake of being with their outside partners.

When Jayanti was working at the United Nations, she met a young man named Oscar and quickly began dating him. Because this would have been unacceptable to her guru, she went to great pains to keep the relationship secret. She kept her status as a follower of Sri Chinmoy a secret from Oscar as well. "I convinced myself that having Oscar wouldn't be a problem if I kept clear boundaries that separated my Oscar-life from my Guru-life – neither would have to know about the other. I refused to admit that I might have to choose, that I was creating an impossible reality" (Tamm, 2009, p. 166). With Oscar, she was able to have what she understood to be a somewhat normal dating relationship, including some limited sexual experimentation; an experience that she delighted in. Eventually, another member became aware of the situation and reported it to Guru, who insisted she terminate the relationship and go live with other followers in France. Jayanti was heartbroken to end the relationship but, at the same time, devastated that she had disappointed Guru. "I knew Guru was right. He was always right. My feelings for Oscar were wrong, delusional" (Tamm, 2009, pl 174). Though she did break-up with Oscar, the grief that followed permeated the rest of her story and contributed to the deep depression that overcame her near her exit. The grief from the sacrifice of this relationship – this other life – served as an important motivation.

Megan's time on Twitter brought her in touch with thousands of people outside Westboro. While Megan's posts were predictably provocative, in keeping with the tone of WBC, a number of them turned into productive conversations and, indeed, lifelong friendships. One friendship was with a Jewish blogger, David, who was adept at pointing out WBC's doctrinal inconsistencies. Though their initial Twitter contact was hostile, as David began to interact with her gently, Megan noticed she naturally followed suit and, despite herself, ended up appreciating David as a person. While Megan was still in the church, the two exchanged gifts on the picket-line when Westboro. went to protest a conference he was speaking at. Megan cites her friendship with him as instrumental to her exit and to enhancing her critical thinking. David was one of the first people Megan contacted after she left, and his support was invaluable. The most intense of these motivating relationships, however, was a romance she developed with an anonymous Twitter-user known only to her by his Twitter handle "FormerlyKnownAs" and eventually the initials C.G. After publicly sparring, the two ended up playing the popular mobile game *Words With Friends*. The in-game chat feature allowed for private conversations, and they messaged daily, growing closer despite C.G.'s strong opposition to WBC, to which Megan was still firmly devoted. She wrote, "His careful attention was intimidating and intoxicating, and all the more so as a figure of him started to form in my mind: exceptionally witty, quietly dignified, deeply curious, and above all, respectful and kind" (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 101). Though C.G. never went so far as to demand she leave, he argued strongly against WBC beliefs, with Megan working hard to defend them. Megan kept her growing feelings and deepening relationship a secret, at times not even admitting it to herself. The disembodied nature of the relationship made it easier to justify. Here again, in uncharted territory, it was hard for her church's strict rules about sexual purity to follow. Was she crossing some kind of line with a man she had never seen

and did not know the name of? She began to harbor a hope that she would convince him of the rightness of WBC doctrine and that he would convert so they could marry, though she barely allowed herself to acknowledge this far-fetched hope. One night, after a sexual dream about C.G., she realized she had gone too far in this “ungodly affection” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 122) and severed the relationship, despite C.G. professing his love. After this, Megan’s time in Westboro would not be the same. “Life went back to normal, but it was grayer than before. I’d finally seen what I was missing, and my world felt impoverished without it. Without him” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 123). Once Megan’s journey began careening towards exit, she again began her conversations with C.G. who proved to be a key support during her difficult transition. In 2016, four years after her exit, Megan married the man she learned was named Chad and they now have a daughter.

Amber’s time working on the podcast in China put her in touch with English speaking people from all over the world who were interested in learning about Chinese language and culture. One of these early correspondents was a man named Jonathan who lived in California and worked in the film industry. Amber began corresponding with him via email and later instant message in the course of her professional work. Like Megan on Twitter, or Jayanti at the United Nations, this was all part of a perfectly appropriate interaction. As their correspondence increased and grew affectionate, Amber became slightly concerned that she was veering into something unseemly. But, again, as with Megan and Jayanti, she had ventured into a space where the usual rules seemed difficult to apply. Jonathan was quite literally on the other side of the world. She had never seen him nor heard his voice. Amber enjoyed getting to know someone who was unaware that she was Jehovah’s Witness, allowing to explore her identity as someone separate from her religious group. “He was interested in what it was like here, what I did, and

what I thought about. He paid attention to my ideas, he thought I was smart and had things to offer the world” (Scorah, 2019, p. 143). When their conversations eventually turned to religion, she confessed she was Jehovah’s Witness. From then, much of their correspondence became about Amber’s beliefs, with Jonathan challenging them, even drawing on anti-cult literature to convince her she was “brainwashed”, “programmed”, and part of a “cult.” This caused Amber to dig in her heels. Still, their relationship deepened and eventually gave Amber a forum to hash out some of her concerns and doubts. With Jonathan, she could share deeply held feelings without fear. As her faith dwindled and her disenchantment grew, Jonathan became a lifeline. Amber’s husband was not interested in thinking outside Jehovah’s Witness teachings and their already tenuous marriage became troubled. During this time, Amber went to California to be with Jonathan (an affair she kept secret) but returned to China and her husband after the short visit. Though the relationship with Jonathan did not continue long after Amber’s exit, it was a pivotal part of her disaffiliation. Amber calls him, “my salvation,” (Scorah, 2019, p.134) and, in the acknowledgments writes, “Last but not least, I want to thank Jonathan Watters for helping me see the light” (p. 278).

While Erin was married to Michael, her guru-mother approved husband, she met a reporter named Scott who went on to write a somewhat sympathetic piece about CUT. Though the two became friendly, their contact was limited and the affection, which Erin never openly expressed to Scott, was one-sided. This relationship, which Erin describes as an obsession on her part, was mostly a fantasy, albeit a very powerful and important one. Erin describes her attraction and her imagined conversations and flirtations. Her feelings intensified when she was told that Scott had described her as beautiful. These thoughts and feelings troubled her greatly and intensified as her disenchantment and exhaustion grew. In many of these imagined

conversations, and in a way similar to Megan and Amber, Erin worked to justify and defend CUT, in a way seeking Scott's approval or, at least, understanding. Much like Megan and Amber, Erin wrote that he "embodied a benevolent, disinterested voice of reason, a defender of the right to be human" (Prophet, 2009, p. 231). Eventually, the guilt of these secret thoughts and feelings proved overwhelming and she confessed them to her mother who attempted to use decrees (akin to prayers) to banish the thoughts and sent Erin to see a staff psychologist. Later, after Erin left, she reflected with her sister, Moira, on the role romantic relationships played in both of their exits. Erin wrote, "I asked Moira about her passion for Marcel, the young Dutchman, which had drawn her away from the ranch. 'Having that fling was my way of getting out of a hypocritical environment,' she said. I shared the story of my obsession with Scott, and she said she thought it had actually rescued me from an inauthentic situation" (Prophet, 2009, p. 255). After some years passed, Erin still remained involved with the church, especially to care for her ailing mother. After her marriage to Michael ended, she met a popular local musician, John, whom she married. This marriage gave her, in part, the stability and financial independence from the church that she needed to eventually exit completely.

For each woman, the process of managing the cycle of doubt, dissonance, and disenchantment eventually became exhausting. Especially after their worlds widened, these instances became more frequent and more intense. This necessitated that the energy, intellect, and emotion that went into resolving them also became more frequent and intense. Once they developed meaningful relationships with those outside, relationships that also required work to manage, justify, and hide, they had new reason to wonder if continuing this cycle was worthwhile. While they each had access to the same resources and techniques they had previously used to manage these, they seemed both less inspired and too exhausted to try. For

Megan and Erin, upheaval in their religious group, and for Amber, troubles in her marriage, compounded the overall weariness that pervaded the final chapters. I argue that this exhaustion, a strong theme in each of the four books, was the final push that moved them towards exit.

Amber describes the increasing tempo of this cycle of doubt, dissonance, and disenchantment in the context of her conversations with Jonathan, time with her new Chinese friends, and success in her job working on the podcast. “I was suddenly, feverishly looking at everything around me, from the meal in front of me to the man I lived with, to the materials I read in preparation for the Sunday meetings, and asking ‘Why?’ I was in a constant distracted state of questioning. I was questioning with a mind that had been trained not to. It was highly uncomfortable” (Scorah, 2019, p. 162). She became increasingly irritated with Jehovah’s Witness teachings, especially when they seemed contradictory, poorly supported, or patronizing and patriarchal. She still participated in all her usual religious activities, but in a rote way. She fantasized about running away to be with Jonathan, as much to be his partner as to simply be rid of the draining cycle she felt trapped in. She longed to go to “...a place where I could forget about Armageddon for a while, with someone who understood, where no one knew me” (Scorah, 2019, p. 175). Importantly, though she had not yet reached a point of rejecting her church’s teachings, she wondered how much longer she could continue to remain an active member. Exhaustion, not outright disbelief, had begun to set in. At the same time, her marriage was suffering. Amber wrote, “It wasn’t like we hated each other, we were just loveless. Lovelessness was worse than loneliness; it sucked the life out of everything we did. It was a leaden cloak suffocating warm flesh. I was exhausted from dragging the relationship around the world in an attempt to revive it” (Scorah, 2019, p. 178). These feelings towards her marriage seemed to parallel her feelings towards her faith, which was declining at the same time and at a similar rate.

The exhaustion she felt trying to keep her married life going may have contributed to the lack of energy she had available to keep her religious life alive. It was not that she no longer believed in the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses; she was now in a loveless relationship with the church.

Like Amber, Megan's experience of her church changed not only after her world expanded and she began spending time on Twitter - conversing with others, befriending them, and being challenged by them - but after her relationship with C.G. Once she felt their friendship was growing too intimate and Megan cut ties with him, she had difficulty maintaining her former zeal. During this time, her church was undergoing a great deal of upheaval, which troubled her. She struggled with increased hypocrisy and onerous rules that she had difficulty justifying. She carried these troubles secretly, increasing their burden. Much like Amber, she wrote, "My mind spun through its familiar circuits, the same objections and doubts that had been brewing for over a year, grasping for something that would return order to the chaos" (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 158). Her writing describing these last weeks as a member of Westboro is punctuated with phrases like "heaviness," "futility," "impossible melancholy," "insurmountable burden," and "crippling guilt" (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 158). In a poignant passage where her months of cycling through concerns culminates in a moment of panicked clarity, Megan writes of trying to paint the walls in a room, finding herself barely able to lift her arm. Her exhaustion is palpable; she no longer has the energy to keep the cycle going.

Though Erin was certainly becoming weary in her role as her mother's right-hand and co-leader of the church long before the failed prophecies of world destruction, the final "shelter episode," as Erin called it, proved to be her breaking point. At the same time, her sense of obligation to disappointed and dejected church members as well as concerns over her mother's mental stability (she did not know it yet, but her mother was in the early stages of Alzheimer's

disease) compelled her to remain involved. She continued to believe that some of the church's teachings had value in people's lives, and she even co-authored a book with her mother during this time. Still, she perceived that, propelled by her mother, much of the church had gotten out of control, causing irrevocable harm to members and a great deal of harm to the environment due to the construction of the fallout shelters. These caused Erin distress, and much of her energy went into trying to make things right. Guilt and the desire to mitigate harm fuelled Erin's participation, rather than any former inspiration or zeal. Her passages describing this period are full of a resigned sense of obligation. It was during this time that she became exhausted to the point of suicidal thoughts. After this, Erin took a temporary leave and spent over a year living on her own. She eventually returned to live again in the community, working again to care for her mother and support the Church Universal and Triumphant to organize in a more healthy, transparent way. However, she wrote, "I was not the same person internally or externally that I had been the last time" (Prophet, 2009, p. 256). Erin stopped much of her religious participation, stopped decreeing (praying), removed religious imagery from her home, and changed her appearance. As Erin's mother's mental state worsened, Erin provided much of her care, further compounding her weariness. Erin's account is one of pervasive, gradual exhaustion that culminates not in a sudden and dramatic exit, but a slow drive away from her former life, looking for a place to begin again.

Jayanti's final years as a follower of Sri Chinmoy are strikingly similar in tone to the other women's accounts. Her ultimate exit was preceded by starts and stops, each time finding a renewed sense of commitment or sense of failure in the outside world that would bring her back. With each return, her exhaustion compounded. "It began subtly, as if my eyesight ever so slightly had weakened, and my clear, sharp determination, once perfectly focused, now was

slightly blurry” (Tamm, 2009, p. 218). During this time, she wrote of being slow, draggy, of wanting to sleep constantly just to pass the time. Barely working up the energy to participate in religious activities, she wrote, “Nothing made me feel awake or inspired. I didn’t know what was wrong with me. Something deeply fundamental had changed” (Tamm, 2009, p. 219). It was during this time that Jayanti attempted suicide. Of this she wrote, “I sputtered tears at my foolish entrapment, and at this pathetic and utterly debilitating attempt of ridding myself of my fabricated life. I screamed and screamed, until my throat was stripped sore, and I collapsed on the ground” (Tamm, 2009, p. 274).

The Process of Deconversion and Disaffiliation

Each of the four women went through a phase that is often described in online message boards as “physically in; mentally out” (PI;MO). That is, they remained for a time in their religious groups while their beliefs, worldviews, and sense of identity had changed. In this way, all of the women initially moved towards *deconversion* without necessarily *disaffiliating* (Bromley, 1991; Fisher, 2017). While it is perfectly possible to disaffiliate without deconverting (i.e. to cease religious participation and membership while still maintaining some or all of the beliefs), this was not the case in these accounts. Living a PI;MO life was appealing to the women, in part, because the perceived cost of leaving was so high. Still, while it could not be sustained, this period was an important step in the journey. Jayanti went through this phase several times in her story, finding ways to appear outwardly compliant while being inwardly disengaged. Eventually, some new crisis or inspiration would draw her to reaffirm her commitment. Often, Jayanti would experience a sense that she could not cope with life outside Guru’s community, and this sense of failure compelled her to return, despite her unbelief. Jayanti would return, “...even though it filled me with dread, the certain endless future of serving a guru

and a mission I no longer believed in” (Tamm, 2009, p. 250). In a conversation with her outside love-interest, Jonathan, Amber rattled off a litany of reasons why she should remain despite her unbelief. She worried that even if she did leave, she would be haunted by her past; she remained convinced that the experience had not been entirely negative; she worried she could not be like other people on the outside; and she still felt some of the Jehovah’s Witness teachings might be true. There was, of course, the very real concern that she would lose her marriage in the process, which was, indeed, the eventual result. “I had yet to see an article that told a man what to do when his wife was an apostate” (Scorah, 2019, 0. 174). For Erin, as one of the primary leaders in CUT, and Megan, as a significant spokesperson for the Westboro Baptist Church, there was also a sense of duty they felt to reform their groups. Both Erin and Megan had moments of crisis that challenged and changed their beliefs, but they attempted to renegotiate in order to remain. After months of trying to manage her concerns culminated in a moment of crisis for Megan, she eventually decided to stay even though she could no longer uphold WBC doctrine. Her plan was to, “Attempt to convince the rest of the church to hear our objections. Pray for the best” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 180). For Erin, the hope to repair damage, reform the organization, care for the vulnerable members, and look after her mother, informed her decision to continue. Erin’s PI;MO experience would last for a decade, beginning after the final shelter episode and culminating in her exit many years later.

For all four women, disaffiliating was not a linear process. Each went through phases where they tried to negotiate a level of continued participation that they could be comfortable with, but these phases were temporary. For Megan and Amber, these phases eventually culminated in an external crisis that forced them to leave. For Erin and Jayanti, this resulted in a process of leaving and returning several times before their final exits. Near the end of their time

in WBC, Megan's sister, Grace, became subject to special scrutiny by the church elders, who felt she was behaving inappropriately with a male member. The situation with Grace suddenly reached a point where she would inevitably have been excommunicated, which set their tenuous plans to leave immediately in motion. Amber eventually revealed her crisis of faith to her husband, at which point the marriage almost immediately fell apart. In meetings with church elders shortly after, Amber was asked to stay away from other members, who also quickly began to stay away from her. The speed of her exit left her without an exit plan. After the last of the failed prophecies, Erin eventually resigned her membership and moved out with her two young children. This proved a challenging situation and difficult to sustain financially. Though there were high-points and a sense of liberation, she missed elements of her old life, especially the group worship and ritual. After her mother softened, Erin returned to their community, but with new boundaries in place. Though her pattern of exit and return is somewhat unclear in the final pages, she did eventually marry a man named John and begin working for his construction business, further liberating her from the Church Universal and Triumphant. She continued her involvement, despite her changing beliefs, and cared for her mother towards the end of her life. Once Erin's eldest son was in college, and her mother's disease progressed so she was unable to recognize her, Erin made the decision to move from Montana to Massachusetts in what would be her final exit. It is clear, however, that her deconversion occurred many years before. Jayanti made three dramatic exits and sorrowful returns, each time feeling like she could not cope on her own in the outside world. At the last, she seemed unable to end her involvement, and enacted a kind of exit-by-rebellion, during which time she acted out so vigorously that her guru permanently exiled her. Reflecting back in the final pages, she expressed gratitude to her guru for this: "He had released me from his elaborate shadow box when I was too afflicted, too weak,

to have done it myself. His freeing me was his greatest unwitting act of compassion” (Tamm, 2009, p. 286).

One of the first tasks the women engaged in upon leaving was seeking education along with exploring art and literature, and simply enjoying learning about the wider world. In a way, it seems they felt a need to fill the void that leaving their religious groups had created – both in terms of beliefs and in terms of community - and delight in the new-found liberation that allowed them to explore. For all four women, leaving their religious groups was both distressing and liberating. Frequently, there was a sense of relief since leaving resolved the dissonance they had been living with, especially in their final months before exit. Because they had all been a part of tight-knit communities where they were dependent on their families/religious groups for housing and financial support, some of the difficulties they experienced after exiting were practical. They had to secure employment and housing. All could be described as precariously housed after their exits and noted financial struggles. Still, these were opportunities for exploration; questing for a new understanding of the world that could feel right to them.

Megan, along with her sister Grace, moved to the nearby state of South Dakota, where they stayed in a rented room, anxious about their dwindling bank accounts. They became close friends with the couple who owned the house. What was supposed to be a temporary situation became their new home when the couple invited the sisters to stay for free and even offered Megan employment. Interestingly, the owners of the house were Jehovah’s Witness, which turned out to be a source of comfort for Megan. They engaged in deep though friendly conversations about the Bible and religion and Megan even attended a church service with them. Though Megan never seemed to seriously consider becoming a Witness, the chance to explore another religious tradition, especially with people who were so kind and supportive, was

liberating. During their first weeks after leaving, Megan and Grace set themselves a structured program of reading literature, philosophy and religion. Her writing during this time is organized as responses to the books she was reading. “I couldn’t think of a more suitable use of our newfound freedom; trying to see the world from the perspectives of others” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 215) and, “I needed wisdom and direction, and I intended to cull as much of it as I could from as many places as I could find it” (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 216). This was also a time to experiment with behaviours that had not been allowed before. Megan quotes from the journal of one of her new Jehovah’s Witness friends as she watched the sisters during this time:

They talked about getting haircuts and bought clip-on earrings (for a test-drive before committing to actual holes) and were flaunting flashy colors of nail polish. Yesterday evening they went out looking for a New Year’s party to crash and today Megan was trying to get a buzz (off 7up and brandy) in order to write a tipsy letter. It’s kind of fun to see them trying to find their feet in this new life of theirs. (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 246).

Erin’s first experience of living on her own was similarly full of struggles, explorations, and experimentations, a pattern that continued even after she returned to the community and lived a more “physically in; mentally out” life. In a way, she hoped that what she thought would be a temporary leave might settle some of her longing for a life outside Church Universal and Triumphant, at which point she could return. “I thought if I could just make some friends my own age, familiarize myself with the music of my generation, and work that silly job I had dreamed about as a teenager, I would be cured” (Prophet, 2009, p. 251). She found a cheap apartment and worked temp jobs. She even tried to rebuild her relationship with her husband, though without the church to keep them together, they found they had little in common and the relationship dissolved. Her relationships with her young sons were strengthened. She was able to

reconnect with her siblings. She, too, quested through reading, eventually turning to sociology to help make sense of her experience. “I read modern literature, poetry, and philosophy, which I had been denied during the seven years of my training, reflecting that even a bad day on the outside was better than the best day in my old life” (Prophet, 2009, p. 254). She wrote of her shifting beliefs during this time, allowing herself to experience ambiguity without need to resolve it. Whereas dissonance describes the unpleasant feeling and distress that accompanies attempts to hold conflicting beliefs, I understand ambiguity, at least in a positive sense, to relate to what the poet Keats called “negative capability.” Dawes summarized Keats’ turn of phrase as, “the capability to experience uncertainty, mystery, and doubt, and to remain *open* to them....” (Dawes, 2013, xii). As well, Erin experienced “sacredness”, once confined to her religious experiences, in everyday experiences in the outside world (Prophet, 2009, p. 254). Even after her return to the community, she dispensed with the vestiges of her former life as a devoted follower of her Guru mother. She dated, changed her appearance, listened to music, and danced. Though she remained connected to CUT, especially to care for her mother, she found ways to move and grow, questing in the directions she chose for herself.

For Jayanti, who also had exits and returns, each visit to the outside world brought new opportunities for questing. Each exit was frightening, both for spiritual and practical reasons. “Leaving the Center was absolutely terrifying; it meant an irrevocable separation from everything that I had ever known, including my mother and father. I would be homeless and penniless” (Tamm, 2009, p. 227). She writes of going several times to a nightclub and being overwhelmed by the sense of freedom, and, at the same time, overcome with loneliness and intimidated by the strangeness. Her sexual experimentation during these times was exhilarating but also accompanied by crushing guilt. She worried about the state of her soul, and this worry

prompted her return each time. After she was, at last, formally expelled by her guru, the finality allowed her to begin her quest in earnest. By this point, her parents had also become disenchanted, and though Guru demanded they remove Jayanti from their home, they refused. For her final exit, she was able to continue living with her parents, which gave her a stability she had not had during her previous forays into the wider world. She felt the lack of her guru in her life keenly, and it created an existential void that all of the women would experience, and that propelled their questing. “No ethics, philosophy, or ideas blossomed organically in myself,” (Tamm, 2009, p. 271). With awareness of this void and nothing now holding her back, she began to explore the world around her, wandering the streets of nearby Manhattan with a sense of freedom. “I could grab anywhere and anything – no limitations” and “The steaming manhole covers, broken traffic lights, and perfectly picked tiers of fresh flowers outside the delis were all part of the vast, rich possibilities. I was free” (Tamm, 2009, p. 282). Her quest led her to enroll in Queens College. She noted that, while her time in an elite girl’s high school had prepared her academically, “I needed to learn subjects and skills about the outside world that would never appear in their course catalogues” (Tamm, 2009, p. 282). Jayanti’s book ends with a short description of receding farther and farther from her life with her guru, and into a life that would eventually prove to be fulfilling.

After the rapid dissolution of her marriage, Amber found herself living alone in China, shunned by the Jehovah’s Witness community. Like the other women, loss of friendship and community was incredibly painful. She, too, needed to establish a sense of identity independent of her religion, and felt she had little to prepare or guide her. Her first weeks on her own were marked by distress, loneliness and confusion. She confessed all of this to her colleagues at the podcast and asked to be included when they went out together. “It was embarrassing to have to

ask for a social life, but people do not think of inviting people who always have said no” (Scorah, 2019, p. 246). Though her new social explorations were at times awkward, Amber began to make friends. She writes of wearing a mini-skirt for the first time, of dating, of learning about politics, other religions and history, and reading material that challenged the veracity of the Bible and religion. She describes her “childlike eagerness to learn about the world” (Scorah, 2019, p. 246). A key part of her journey was learning about other alternative religions, and Amber sought help from anti-cult material, finding in this a description of her experience that fit for her. She eventually moved to New York City where she struggled for some time to cope financially. Still, of this time in New York, much like Jayanti, she wrote, “I go to rooftops. I go to art galleries. I go to museums, I read in parks. I sit in the majestic churches of Fifth Avenue, just to see how it feels. I go anywhere free” (Scorah, 2019, p. 265). Amber’s quest also brought her to education, “I am enrolled in college at night school, I am getting my degree. My thoughts feel slow at first, after so much disuse, but they soon sharpen. I am often the oldest student in the class and make friends with the professors more than with my classmates” (Scorah, 2019, p. 267). Amber goes on to have another relationship and a child, Karl, who died of undetermined causes in his sleep when he is just a few months old and on his first day at a childcare centre. Amber’s world is rocked again as she tries to integrate this tragedy into her new perspective on life, without the comfort of her former beliefs to guide her. Her book ends on this understandably raw and heartbreaking note, with Amber still questing for a painful understanding.

Analysis

Religious deconversion is most often portrayed as a personal decision and a largely solitary experience. Fisher’s (2017) model summarizing current scholarly perspectives on leaving religion proposes a process that entails the private and highly internal experience of

questioning, doubting, and reconfiguring. Consideration is not given to the context of these internal processes. Further, whereas conversion studies are now cognizant of the important role relationships play in *joining* religious groups, the field is quite silent about the role relationships play in *leaving*. Yet if the most crucial factor in religious conversion, as Greil and Rudy (1984) suggest, is the process of coming to see that reality in the way that one's friends do, it is likely that this is also a critical though unacknowledged factor in the *deconversion* process.

Contrary to this popular depiction of an individualized road away from religious life, it is clear that relationships, and romantic relationships in particular, were instrumental to these women's exits. At the same time, no one wanted to go so far as to say that they left, "for a boy." In their work on religious socialization and college students in Canada, Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2006) identified a handful of participants they describe as "amazing apostates"; those who come from religious backgrounds who then become atheists. Hunsberger (2000) describes this process as being "strongly intellectual and rational, and seems to result from a slow, careful search for meaning and purpose" (p. 245). He further suggests that "amazing believers," those who embrace religion after growing up in an irreligious context, are driven primarily by emotional concerns, while "amazing apostates" are driven primarily by intellectual integrity. I believe this perception contributes strongly to the dominant narrative of *deconversion*. Within this is an unspoken hierarchy of acceptable reasons for leaving one's religion. If moving towards irreligion is a way of displaying one's intellectual growth, falling in love is not held up to be an indicator of this. In these memoirs, romance is portrayed as a factor in the author's exits, but not the driving force. It is more of an inspiration rather than an explanation. This is particularly seen in Amber's story of leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses and Megan's story of leaving Westboro. Both crafted their stories to show that their intellectual

journeys away from their religious beliefs paralleled their romantic journeys but, at the same time, go to lengths to show that they did not fully pursue a romance with their love interests until they had first satisfied their theological and philosophical questions and concerns. The authors seem to want the reader to think of them as intelligent and rational before they are emotional, as though being emotional is a less desirable way to operate in the world.

As a reader, my emotions seemed to reflect the progression of the women's stories. An advantage of reading memoirs, itself a process that takes time and energy, is that it gives one a sense of going on a journey alongside the author. Exhaustion was frequently my own reaction to their stories. I often noted my own responses while reading and, at one point near the end of Erin's book, I wrote in the margins, "I am so tired now." Not tired of the story but fatigued by the journey; by the starts and stops, the endless attempts to renegotiate and make things work, the overwhelming emotions of sadness and loss. How much more so for them? While each woman described singular moments of doubt, dissonance, and disenchantment as critically significant to their exits, the final piece needed to make their exits was the push that came from exhaustion. Megan's heavy arms as she tried to paint a room, Amber's weary work to keep her marriage going, Erin's ceaseless care and attention to her dying mother, and Jayanti's tears in the bed she could no longer pull herself out of became entangled with their dwindling faith until, finally, they could prop it up no longer.

For Erin and Megan in particular, this exhaustion was coupled with care-work obligations (especially domestic and emotional labour) which kept them involved with their religious communities past the point of their deconversion. In other words, in order to perform care-work, they remained in their groups even while they would have liked to leave. For both Erin and Megan, who were leaders in their communities, this care-work included a sense of obligation to

protect vulnerable members by trying to encourage organizational reform. Megan hoped to protect her younger siblings from what she saw as WBC's oppressive and restrictive new policies. Erin hoped to temper some of her guru-mother's prophecies and reform CUT policy in a way that might limit the potential for harm in addition to caring for her mother through her rapidly developing Alzheimer's disease.

The role care work plays in religious exit has yet to be addressed by scholars but is likely critical to understanding the context of women's religious transitions. Vast amounts of literature spanning decades has explored how the unequal and gendered distribution of social, emotional, and familial care work impacts women's health and wellness, financial stability, career aspirations, and so on (Bianchi et al., 2012; Geist & Ruppanner, 2018; Hochschild, 2012; Houle et al., 2015; Kamp Dush et al., 2017; Moyser & Burlock, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2015). However, research has yet to explore how these obligations shape gendered differences in religious exit and, in particular, how care work might contribute to women defecting in place (Winter, Lumis & Stokes, 1994). This is likely because, as my arguments thus far have demonstrated 1) studies of deconversion tend to privilege individual rather than social/relational experiences, 2) these studies similarly privilege the cognitive/intellectual over the emotional, and 3) gender (along with race, sexuality, class, and so forth) is not often taken into account in either conversion or deconversion studies. I interpret the exhaustion these four women experienced as a form of religious and spiritual burn-out compounded, in the case of Megan and Erin, by care-work obligations.

Social-worker, scholar, and activist Vikki Reynolds (2011) writes of burnout in the context of professional care workers. She challenges the notion of burnout as a primarily individual problem (e.g. the worker has failed to perform adequate self-care) and suggests it is a

response to witnessing systemic suffering and injustice. Reynolds (2011) writes, “Burnout sounds like we are toys with reusable batteries that are used up. As if we’re not doing enough yoga or drinking enough water and these are important things, I do yoga and I drink water but self-care is not enough to offset the issues of poverty, violence and basic dignity people struggle with” (p. 29).

Similarly, religious and spiritual burnout is, at times, written about in these memoirs as something that might be corrected through some form of prayer or meditation, study of scriptures, increased participation in religious activities, and so on. The women would apply these antidotes in the hope that they might cure their growing apathy, concern, and exhaustion, but with limited success. Religious and spiritual burnout may better be understood not as a personal failing but a response to a growing awareness of systematic injustice, troubling doctrines, and hypocrisy in their religious communities. In addition, the unequal distribution of religious and spiritual care-work appears to be an as-yet unexplored facet of women’s religious experience. Just as women typically take on a greater proportion of domestic responsibilities, it seems likely they might also assume a similar role in the life of their religious communities. This leads me to wonder how women’s experience of unequal responsibilities in their religious lives (e.g. taking primary responsibility for overseeing children’s religious education, organizing refreshments after services, maintaining social connections with other members, and so on) influences their religious experience, and their religious exits in particular.

Conclusion: We all walk into a bar...

At some point near the end, all of the women ended up in bars. I like to imagine the five of us meeting this way. I want the opportunity to tell them about my own journey, alongside theirs, into uncertainty. We would talk about loss and renewal; of what we miss and what still

makes us angry. I would tell them what parts of their stories made me cry. I would tell them about how, in the midst of reading their books, I found myself unable to fall asleep for worry about them. I want to tell them they are brave and that I am proud of them. I want to tell them that they are not alone. Each of these stories, including my own, reached a point not of conclusion, but a kind of peace in ambiguity. As Amber so poignantly summarized it, “This alchemy of life, this magical planet, they bewilder me, they awe me. But no understanding comes, any more than it did to any other human who walked this hard land, feeling entitled to explanations where there are none. I have called a truce with the unknown, and I am learning to live with the disquiet” (Scorah, 2019, p. 276). Jeanette Winterson (2011), also a memoirist who wrote about leaving religion, says that the measure of love is loss. If this is the case, then it is clear that we have all suffered from a great love. Winterson (2011) writes, “When we tell a story we exercise control, but in such a way as to leave a gap, an opening. It is a version, but never the final one. And perhaps we hope that the silences will be heard by someone else, and the story can continue, can be retold (p. 8). With this analysis, I hope Amber, Erin, Jayanti and Megan will feel that I heard not only their words but also their silences and, with my own work, have given their stories a way to continue.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

There was a time in my twenties when I was fascinated by the innumerable logical arguments for the existence of god (in my case, this was some form of Christian god, as I understood it). The first cause argument, the moral argument, the argument from design, and so on. I hoped that by studying these supposed proofs I would come away with some kind of certainty about god. However, I always seemed to be swayed by whomever I was listening to at the time – whether atheist or theist – and found myself constantly vacillating in my opinions. In the end, I dismissed all of these proofs as either highly debatable or simply beyond my understanding. One, however, has continued to fascinate me: The Argument from Desire. The most well-known formulation of the argument comes from the renowned author, academic, and Christian apologist, C.S. Lewis. Lewis (2017) formulates the argument this way:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world (p. 57).

I am not interested in the veracity of the argument or in determining whether it is adequate “proof” of the existence of the divine. However, there is a thread of something at work here that is very reminiscent of Derrida and deconstruction and this is the thread that I would like to follow. Lewis’s argument (or what might more rightly be thought of as a speculation) resonates with Caputo’s (1997) summary of Derrida in the following: “What we truly ‘desire’ above all,

wildly, in a desire beyond desire, is this impossible thing that can never be experienced, never be met with in the sphere of phenomenal presence” (p. 144).

As I read these four memoirs and as I have spent the last decade coming to terms with my own story of deconversion and disaffiliation, I have come to understand that while factors like doubt, dissonance, and disenchantment may have *pushed* me out of my religious communities and beliefs, at the same time, desire was there, *pulling*. Ultimately, it was this pull factor that brought these women to the final leap of exit. The Argument from Desire cuts both ways, then, calling us into as well as away from religious belonging.

Doubt is a thing you do. Dissonance is a pain you experience. Disenchantment is something that befalls you. But desire is something else altogether. It is somehow a part of you. It is a secret, a hope, a prayer, and a longing. It is an invitation. Desire asks something of you. In these memoirs, I began to note the women’s encounters with what I call their Shadow Sisters. From time to time and while still in their ARMs, the women would mention how they were overcome with a sense of what life might be like if only things were different. They imagined the kinds of women they would be if they had been able to live out these shadow lives. In a sense, these stories are their journeys towards embracing or integrating their Shadow Sister selves. In doing so, they also embrace their own desires and hopes for their lives and their bodies. These Shadow Sisters are independent, sexual, and accomplished. The women speculated about how their Shadow Sisters had their own apartments, careers, pursued their own interests and passions, and gave in to their sexual desires and fantasies. Sexual desire may be the most overt portrayal of desire in these stories, but it would be a misrepresentation to suggest that desire for these women only encompasses sexuality. As in the Jungian concept of the Shadow, the Shadow Sisters encapsulated all the passions, sins, and darkness that these women longed for

often as a secret even to themselves; tucked away in their unconscious, accessible only as a shadow passing by or coming to them in a literal dream.

A straight-forward reading of these texts might leave the reader with the impression that after leaving their religious groups these women rode off into the sunset into a land where all their problems were solved, all their desires met. But I suspect, were I able to follow up with them about their lives in the years after their books ended, I would find that this is not the case. Central to these stories is a reckoning with desire; an acknowledgement that there was something inside themselves that was perpetually longing for “more,” for “beyond.” As Lewis (2017) might say, for “another world” (p. 57) or what Derrida might call “the undeconstructable” (Caputo, 1997, p. 166). In the true fashion of Deconstruction, this desire is perpetually unfulfilled, and the moment one thinks it has been captured or achieved is the same moment it is already gone. After leaving their ARMs, I imagine the women were regularly wooed by the promises of fulfillment that tempt us all. It seems to be an incredibly human phenomenon to cling to a relationship, a job, a religion, and so on, in the hopes that it will contain the happy ending we all seem to be seeking. But the path of deconstruction recognizes that every messiah is ultimately a false prophet, whether they are a guru leading an ARM, a celebrity selling a “lifestyle brand,” or a former reality TV star turned president. This is because, as Caputo (1997) writes, “Deconstruction does not terminate at all, but keeps starting up all over again, beginning where we are, driven by a faith in the impossible and undeconstructable” (p. 166).

Most of the books in the “cult memoir” genre are presented as popular stories of redemption; the wayward “cult girl” realizes the errors of her upbringing and joins mainstream society to find freedom and fulfillment. At least, this is what the dustcovers would like us to think. Seemingly without permission from their authors, the memoirs examined here coyly

unravel and show themselves not to be stories of losing faith but finding it. But rather than faith in inherited traditions, sacred texts, and the comfort and certainty that comes from a tight-knit religious group, they had faith in their own intellect, moral sense, and their ability to cope and even thrive in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty. The popular meta-narrative the authors believe themselves to be legitimizing is, in the end, the one they are defying; they may have lost their religion, but they ended up finding their faith. I can say this no better than Caputo did in an interview on faith and deconstruction:²⁰

Faith, doubt and uncertainty interweave with each other and make each other possible.

It's only when things are dubious and clouded that you need to have faith, otherwise your faith is dogmatic. And by the same token, the only reason why you'd be disturbed about your uncertainty and your doubt is that you're looking for something and your heart is restless, as St. Augustine says. There's something you want, and you feel the pain.

Feeling pain is a good thing; it's the body signaling you that there's something wrong.

Doubt and uncertainty are a little bit like that. They're signs of life; of desire; of "love of something I know not what." They're signs that you're searching. To the dubious, congratulations on your doubt. It means that you're looking for something. Doubt is not the same as despair. Despair is the more serious problem. If you're riddled with doubts and it keeps you up at night, you're on the right track. You're doing fine. It's when you stop worrying about your doubts and you become utterly indifferent to them that you're in trouble. On the other hand, if you're absolutely sure you're right, you know you're

²⁰ This has been transcribed from an interview on a podcast, The [De]constructionists, retrieved from: <https://thedeconstructionists.com/ep-18-john-d-caputo-derrida-deconstruction-weak-theology/>

wrong. You've left something out. Because a genuine faith is struggling. You're saved by doubt, not by faith. You're saved by the faith that's in doubt and the doubt that's in faith.

Ultimately, the argument that persuaded these four women to venture out on their own is the Argument from Desire; the longing for some indescribable and always unfulfilled "more." The undeconstructable other world that is always already just on the horizon. In stepping out into the ambiguity of an uncertain world, without the comfort of their ARM communities and their former beliefs, they placed themselves in situations where they must act and operate without certainty. In this way, they took a true leap of faith.

5.2 Recommendations for Practitioners

Because the brainwashing or "escape from a cult" narrative has taken hold so strongly as both a popular notion and a therapeutic convention, it would seem necessary offer an equally compelling counternarrative in the form of a memorable and easily accessible framework for ARM involvement and disaffiliation. This is a challenging task and one that, I fear, might prove less helpful than might be imagined. While here I have highlighted common themes in the form of a model of disaffiliation and deconversion, I am hesitant to hold up such a model as typifying a universal experience especially since one of my main points has been that for those raised in ARMs, a varied experience is the norm. Thus, rather than prescriptively outline a therapeutic process that practitioners might rely on when working with those involved in or leaving ARMs, I choose to offer more general thoughts or suggestions. My choice has the disadvantage of not providing a snappy framework that fits nicely into a leaflet. Certainly, in the future this kind of knowledge mobilization is an avenue some scholars might want to explore, especially for the sake of countering unhelpful and misguided information with more robust material in a way that can be easily accessible to practitioners. At the same time, refraining from this kind of

formulation invites practitioners to take a more curious and exploratory approach with clients, avoiding the pitfalls and common assumptions that have become a hallmark of current therapeutic perspectives. This kind of openness is central to narrative therapy, a perspective at the core of my helping philosophy. In my practice, the relational co-construction of meaning through an ongoing process of shaping and re-shaping personal narrative is the foundation of the helping relationship, rather than the application of a model or completing activities in a workbook.

Fisher (2017), in his model of religious deconversion and disaffiliation, proposes that individuals cycle through a pattern of doubting, questioning, and reconfiguring before moving away from their religious beliefs and communities. Fisher's model is significant not only because it is one of the few to present a summary of deconversion/disaffiliation but because Fisher is a therapist and the model was developed to guide clinicians in their work with those experiencing religious change. Here, unresolved questions may turn to doubts with the individual either reconfiguring their beliefs or deciding they are in error and moving away from their religious groups. Fisher's model centres on the binary of doubt/faith, where faith (and/or belief) is positioned as the defining characteristic of the religious experience for which doubt is its opposite. From this perspective, when unresolved questions turn to significant doubts, the individual may perceive that they have little choice but to admit they are wrong and move away from their religious communities. This appears to be the meta-narrative accepted not only in much of the deconversion literature, but in mainstream understandings of the experience.

It is especially important that therapists are attuned to the ways that over-arching meta-narratives may influence and limit the ways clients tell stories of religious transition. It is possible to feel a sense of obligation to a dominant discourse, even as this discourse limits

possibilities. In addition, anti-cult discourse in general and brainwashing theories in particular are heavily gendered. As I began to look for books to use in this study, it was quickly apparent that nearly all memoirs written about the ARM experience are written by women. So much so that one is hard-pressed to find memoirs within in Amazon's "religious cult" category that are written by men. This may be because meta-narratives about the ARM experience often rely on a variation of the "damsel in distress" trope which may make this genre of writing less appealing to men, or anyone who wants to skirt this convention. Often, there is a captive – typically a woman – raised in an oppressive system, who comes to her senses and longs to be free, and who is then assisted in her exit with the help of a male romantic partner.

Understanding how this particular narrative formulation has been given cultural legitimacy is a first step towards pursuing other narrative possibilities. Undoing, thickening, and breaking-open possibilities in a therapeutic context may require therapists to up-end ARM stereotypes and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about the ARM experience. Here I briefly highlight ways therapists might engage in practice with former ARM members, particularly women, in a way that centres dignity and agency and counters the dominant discourse about ARMs.

First, recognize the diversity of ARM experiences and be prepared to help clients be radically curious about their own stories. This requires the therapist to be self-reflective and engage with their own biases and preconceived notions about ARMs. It is important to understand the particular ARM a client has come to discuss and to resist making assumptions based on a perceived broad understanding of all "cults." This might require a therapist to not only have basic religious literacy, but one who is able to do a bit of research on their own about the particular religious group. Therapists should be wary that much of the popular self-help

literature, especially when it is targeted to specific ARMs, is often written by oppositional former members. The independent British charitable organization, INFORM, is one of the few services that provides research-based and up-to-date information for the public about ARMs. INFORM is an excellent resource for lay-people, therapists, concerned family members, and anyone who is looking for an approachable way to engage with this complex topic.²¹

Embrace a holistic approach to religious transition that moves beyond the doubt-centric model. This means being aware of the other “push” factors of dissonance and disenchantment and giving these the consideration they deserve, especially as clients may not understand these as “legitimate” reasons for religious exit. For example, using an externalizing technique from narrative therapy, framing dissonance as a character in story may be helpful (Morgan, 2000). For these four authors, I would be curious to know, for example, if dissonance was seen as a villain when it first arrived on the scene. Approaching the end of the story, might dissonance be revealed to be something else? Perhaps wisdom, or intuition? Using these externalizing techniques and naming these experiences as encounters with dissonance can bring increased granularity to the stories and open up possibilities for telling alternative stories (Denborough, 2014). Another way to address dissonance is to consider that the body is communicating valuable information. What might otherwise be viewed as a problem or a physical complaint like a headache or a stomach-ache may be dissonance trying to communicate valuable information. Culturally, so much emphasis is placed on the role of doubt in religious exit that other ways of knowing outside the intellectual can be neglected. Respecting dissonance as a way the body might communicate elevates this way of knowing.

²¹ INFORM’s website can be accessed here: <https://inform.ac/>

Consider the ways that grief and loss are at work in clients' exit stories. This includes grief not only for the life left behind, but the life not lived. In these memoirs, there was often a sense of loss as the women watched their peers on the outside seemingly surpass them or as they became aware of their Shadow Sisters and began to grapple with the life they were not living. With this, recognize the "pull" factor of desire. It may be worthwhile to disentangle desire from notions of "wanting to sin" if this is a narrative that is used by that particular religious community as their primary explanation for disaffiliation. What might desire be inviting someone to step into?

Look for ways to build reflexive identity. In Coates' (2013) study of those who had left ARMs, she noted that some were able to use the opportunity to develop a great deal of self-awareness and reflexivity. Though this often required a process of active learning and effort, the result was an increased sense of independence and individuality. Not everyone will have the opportunity to have the ontological rug pulled out from them in quite the same way that those who exit ARMs do and, while startling and disorienting, this may also provide a chance for tremendous growth.

5.3 Conclusion

What do we do when we do not know what to do? This question is central to these four stories, to the experiences of those who leave ARMs, and to child and youth care practice. A child and youth care worker who has spent any time in the field is likely to quickly learn that, despite our best efforts and good intentions, at the end of the day we must go home not knowing if what we have done will bring about more harm than good. Most of the time we do not know how things will go for a client, and there are rarely follow-up calls 15 years later to let us know how everything turned out. Someone once advised me to operate as though 25% of what I am

doing as a practitioner is incorrect, even dangerous, I just do not know which 25%. A frightening, humbling, and likely accurate thought. Worse still is coming to understand that, despite not knowing, we must keep going.

How we live our lives in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty is not a question confined to those who have exited ARMs or those who are in helping professions; it is the reality that we all contend with. The institutions, values, traditions, and relationships that we see as so stable and unmovable are really just illusions. While those who have been raised in and left ARMs might confront this in a way few others will, it is equally true for all of us. The (often painful) times that we must acknowledge these hard truths are also the times when we are invited to step out in faith, unsure of the right way to go or what might crumble beneath our feet. But we still keep moving forward. Despite not knowing, we must keep going.

I sometimes think of my work as “faith-based practice for the former believer.” But rather than a faith that is bolstered by the assurance of specific beliefs, this faith rests in and grows out of unknowing. I argue that it is precisely this unknowability that opens up possibilities and provokes hope. With Derrida (2005), I am drawn to the “*perhaps* to come” (p. 38). While it is startling to have one’s worldview collapse, and frightening to feel like anything might be possible, the flip-side is to realize that, for the very same reason, *anything might be possible*. Framed this way, doubting can be wondering, and unknowing can be a reason to hope. The more we deconstruct and expose the wiring and rigging of life, the more we are able to reconstruct in new, unforeseen, ways. To me, this reconstruction is part of the deep joy I find in life and especially in research. I love the word *unforeseen* – it is full of so much *perhaps*. Life is full of unforeseen consequences and, in my life, many of these consequences have been delightful. The unforeseen is a reason to be hopeful.

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